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1 Introduction

Abraham Lincoln once stated that “You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.”

This essay places the statement into the context of sustainability. The statement then is critically evaluated considering the relative roles of business, governments, and society.

To address the question, the statement is first deconstructed and the concepts of responsibility, business, government and society, sustainability and moral actions are introduced and critically assessed. Then, a discussion of what “tomorrow’s responsibility” is and how it can be met (or avoided) concludes the essay.

A broad selection of sources was used for this essay. Contemporary and seminal academic articles are complemented by business publications and current affairs reports from newspapers, social media, and the internet.

The essay consists of three parts. The introduction of concepts is followed by the discussion of what constitutes responsibility. In the final section, Lincoln’s statement is critically evaluated based on the concepts introduced in the first two sections (Figure 1).

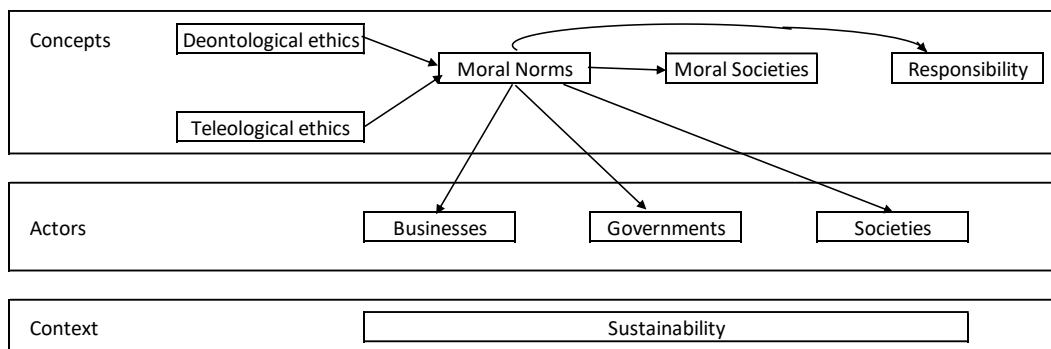


Figure 1. Essay overview and concept map

The first concept is that of moral behaviours and decision-making. The concept of morality is introduced and the deontological and teleological ethical approaches to morality are explored. The concept of a moral system is explained next. Second, the concept and definition of sustainability are introduced. The development of this concept is traced over time. Third, responsibility is defined and the shift of the research focus to incorporate environmental issues into this concept is highlighted. Then responsibility is explored in relation to governments, businesses and society.

The discussion concludes with an example that challenges Lincoln’s statement. This essay shows how concepts of morality and sustainability and, therefore, societies’, businesses’ and governments’ responsibilities change over time.

2 Concept introduction

The call for more moral, sustainable and responsible behaviour and actions is not a recent one. In the 17th to 19th centuries, people like Pufendorf, Malthus and Lincoln spoke about our responsibility

for sustainable use of resources (Fieser, 2020). This section explores the concepts of morality, sustainability and responsibility and then links them to expected behaviours of businesses, governments and societies.

2.1 Moral

Morality can be defined as a distinct *code of conduct* conceived by society or parts of it (Alexander and Moore, 2020). Moral principles are the guidelines for people's behaviour within a social organisation (Carnes et al., 2015). Moral communities have strong shared beliefs in a set of moral norms, however, the interpretation of these principles can be subject to local interpretations (Marshall, 2020, Babst, 2011). Thus, morality has a spatial dimension.

Further, the "code of conduct" requires interpretation. There are two main streams in interpreting morality: the deontological and teleological perspectives. The former goes back to the works of 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant. The latter enjoyed the support of Hegel and Marx.

2.1.1 Deontological View

Immanuel Kant claimed that moral behaviour means to act according to the moral law without self-interested motive (Duignan et al., 1998). Essentially, this implies that the outcome of an action is irrelevant as long as the actor was fulfilling her duty. Deontological philosophers including Pufendorf and W.D. Ross compiled lists of duties to be fulfilled by a moral person. Kant claimed that there is only one duty: the categorical imperative: Act only if you are prepared to make your actions a universal law (Fieser, 2020). Although Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hegel and others have criticised Kant's categorical imperative for not being thought through thoroughly (Lam, 2017), his view on morality is still accepted and lived today. An alternative to Kant's duties theory in deontological ethics is the rights theory. John Locke argued that one's duty is always based on someone else's right (e.g. my right as a woman to be equally treated as men implies the duty of another person not to discriminate me against men) (Fieser, 2020).

The strict application of the deontological theory for decision making is difficult in practice. Individuals play more than one role (e.g. employee, wife, colleague, team member) (Solinger et al., 2020). Assuming that each role is linked to specific rules and duties it will be ambiguous which rule or duty should be applied. For example, a colleague who is related to you has violated the code of integrity which could harm the organisation's reputation. Which duty should you fulfil? As an employee, you would have the duty to inform your superior about the incident. Or should you fulfil your social duty as a family member and cover up for him to avoid detection and punishment?

2.1.2 Teleological/Consequentialism Egoism/Altruism/Utilitarianism

Contrary to the deontological view, the teleological theory considers the consequence of a person's action. There are several complementing and competing teleological theories including egoism, altruism and utilitarianism (Fieser, 2020). Depending on the theory, the person should assess the consequences of their action for themselves, others or everyone. Essentially, as long as the outcome of a person's action is positive it does not matter what action has been taken.

The assessment of the outcome is a tricky task. For example, due to the current pandemic travelling to other countries is associated with some risks. An employee has to travel abroad to perform an audit for a cheese-maker which will enable them to sell their cheese at Tesco. Should the line manager allow travel, taking all the necessary precautions? Considering personal consequences, the manager will act according to the company's policy and send the employee abroad. Considering the consequences for the employee, the manager would avoid exposure and keep the employee at home. Considering the wider community, the food producer may lose revenue, the certification

body may be liable for penalties if the audit is not carried out. A Tesco's customer, who cannot find their favourite cheese will cross the street to ASDA and will be hit by a car... It is impossible to always foresee all consequences of one's actions. Thus, the teleological approach cannot always provide a clear morally correct answer.

2.1.3 Moral systems in practice

Irrespective of a philosophical view, moral systems enable social coexistence and are essential as a guideline for decision-making in societies (Carnes et al., 2015). The development of moral systems (moralisation) is a process which happens through the day-to-day interactions and happenings and people's awareness of these (Feinberg et al., 2019).

These interactions happen on personal, interpersonal and societal levels (Figure 2). The actions are motivated by the desire to reduce bad and to increase good moral behaviour (Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013).

	Self (personal)	Other (interpersonal)	Group (collective)	Outgroup (intergroup)
Protect/ Inhibition (proscriptive regulation)	self-restraint/ moderation	not harming	social order/ communal solidarity	increased aggression, violence
Provide/ Activation (prescriptive regulation)	industriousness	helping/ fairness	social justice/ communal responsibility	decreased aggression, violence

Figure 2. Intergroup implications of the modal of moral motives (Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013)

The resulting matrix identifies six moral behaviours which drive moral human interaction. On the "collective"-level, people are motivated by social justice, solidarity and responsibility. Is a moral socially just society also a sustainable one? The next section investigates the concept of sustainability.

2.2 Sustainability and sustainable future

Can we claim that a moral society is an environmentally sustainable society? To answer this question we need to define what environmental sustainability means. In this essay, environmental sustainability is defined as a continuous coexistence of humans and other species within a shared, protected and thriving ecosystem. In this system, the needs of humans are carefully balanced against the welfare and health of the natural environment as a whole (Costanza and Patten, 1995, Hodge, 1997, Giddens and Sutton, 2013).

In 2015, the United Nations Organisation (UN) has defined 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). These goals provide a list of performance indicators to evaluate our common progress towards sustainability. A sustainable future requires us to change the way in which we interact with our social and ecological environment (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020).

A sustainable future concerns all parts of humanity. The triple-helix of governments, educators and businesses is required to effect the changes.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN has just released a special broadcast underlining the urgency of progress despite the disruption caused by COVID-19 (United Nations, 2020b). A catastrophic wakeup call forcing us to change might be what is needed to speed up change and progress (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020).

Challenging the status quo requires social entrepreneurs to think outside the box. Thus, society needs to educate the new generation of entrepreneurs to be creative (Lenn, 2012).

The social entrepreneurs develop innovative sustainable ways and opportunities by experimenting and challenging the “old ways” of doing business (Arikan et al., 2020). However being a social entrepreneur driven by social values does not mean acting ethical or sustainable in every respect (Chell et al., 2016, Peredo and McLean, 2006).

One example of successful cooperation between businesses, governments and research institutions is the University of Plymouth's Marine Institute working together with government and businesses. Marine biologist Professor Richard Thompson found that on the average 700,000 plastic fibres form textiles made of polyester, nylon and acryl degrade during one wash cycle. These fibres are not captured in wastewater treatment systems and are released into the environment. Thompson's research is funded by the government and the research provides valuable knowledge for the textile industry for their design process and the development of new materials made of recycled plastic which do not shed fibres (Plymouth, 2020, Ecoalf, 2020, The Economist, 2020).

2.3 Responsibility

Responsibility is defined as having the *duty of care* for or control of something or someone and being accountable and, further, it means the moral obligation of correct behaviour (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). The effects of “incorrect behaviour” by individuals and governments have been made very obvious during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic: caused by single people in China, exacerbated or alleviated by inactions or decisiveness of governments (Alvarez and Porac, 2020).

Early business studies on responsibility studies focussed purely on social issues. Until 1979 focus was on duty of care for the people and no responsibility for the environment, earth, wildlife was a concern of management practice (Zenisek, 1979). Twenty years on CSR was still defined as responsibility towards improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of the workforce and the wider community (Van Beurden and Gössling, 2008). This has changed and responsibility studies today regard the natural environment too (Bansal and Song, 2017).

However, sustainability is still not at the top of the business research agenda. One of the top journals in management the “Academy of Management Review” has not published a single article within 2020 containing the word "sustainability". There was one article published in 2018 and 2019 each. This raises the question of whether sustainability is still not important enough for management scholars.

Since the beginning of industrialisation human commercial activity has caused unprecedented sustained damage to the natural environment (Lyon, 2019). The extent to which certain moral norms are concerned binding varies on the individual bases, however, there are some norms which are accepted by the society as a whole (e.g. not harming other beings) (Carnes et al., 2015). This communal solidarity strengthens the unity of the moral community within the respective moral

system and functions as a means of safety within and outwards this moral community (Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013). It has now been accepted that the natural environment deserves protection. This has implications for the responsibilities of governments, businesses and individuals

2.3.1 Responsibility of governments

Governments responsibilities are the provision of common services such as road infrastructure, education, security. A sustainable environment is also a shared good for which governments must assume responsibility (Encyclopedia, 2020). Governments have established several laws and acts since the 1970ies to protect the environment (Lyon, 2019). The governments must assume moral leadership to create awareness of shortcomings or injustices and drive businesses and individuals towards sustainable and morally just alternatives (Solinger et al., 2020, Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013).

2.3.2 Responsibility of businesses

Commercial businesses have a financial responsibility towards their shareholders. However, businesses operate within moral communities and the stakeholders expect moral actions towards sustainability; Thus businesses have a social responsibility too. Social businesses with a focus on sustainability are often smaller businesses (Chell et al., 2016). Assessing the “responsibility of tomorrow” – is the financial responsibility outweighing the social responsibility for larger businesses? On the other hand, a large business can spend billions as part of their “insignificant” CSR initiative and practically have an absolute larger positive environmental impact than any small social business.

The governments and governance enforce some form of businesses transparency on social and environmental impact (Van Beurden and Gössling, 2008). Businesses have begun to publish Corporate Social Responsibility reports to increase approval by their stakeholders, gain legitimacy and have better access to finance (Zhang et al., 2020). Over the years, the quality of CSR reports has improved, however, their credibility remains questionable (Helfaya and Moussa, 2017).

2.3.3 Responsibility of society

Society tends to pretend that our actions are harmless and insignificant, thus relieving ourselves from the responsibility (Feinberg et al., 2019). However, individual actions matter. For example, according to the Worldwide Fund For Nature (WWF), 50 million hectares of forests were lost in the last five years. Our growing population means growing consumerism. The increased demand for dairy, meat and coffee means more grassland and plantations and fewer forests (Bauer et al., 2020). On the personal level, responsible consumption is one way of alleviating the problem. It requires awareness of the causes and effects of consumerism and education from the early stages (Bundesregierung, 2018). The awareness campaign “#Together4Forests” by WWF in cooperation with over 130 environmental groups started this year to demand a law which rigorously ensures the protection of forests. The campaign had been signed by more than 1 million people showing societal engagement with the issues of sustainability (Bauer and Schulmeister, 2020, Bauer et al., 2020).

3 Discussion

Can society, governments and businesses escape the responsibility of tomorrow by ignoring it today? This is a difficult question to answer either way.

Whichever philosophical stance is applied – teleological or deontological, the assessment is difficult.

The governments are political and are ultimately forced to do “popular” things which may not be socially just and environmentally sustainable (Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013). This can be seen in

different reactions by the German and British governments to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the interpretations of moral norms are diverging between conservatives and liberals (Carnes et al., 2015). Therefore, there are moral conflicts within the moral community which has a divergent understanding of social justice.

Doing “the right thing” for businesses is also difficult. There is a lack of guidance: Responsibility and environmental sustainability are two independent unconnected research streams (Bansal and Song, 2017). The meaning of socially responsible corporate behaviour differs according to different legislation, customs, societal situations present at different localities and times with different people and moral systems (Bansal and Song, 2017).

Further, business leaders make decisions under uncertainty: using uncertain inputs and trying to predict uncertain outcomes. The decisions are improvable beforehand and often involve high-risk (Arend, 2020, Peredo and McLean, 2006). If an entrepreneur makes a decision under immitigable uncertainty of which the outcome is not predictable and the decision cannot be optimised would this entrepreneur still be morally responsible for the outcome?

It appears to be an impossible task to know what the “responsibility of tomorrow” is going to be.

3.1 Horses, Diesel and Tesla

At the end of the 19th century, large overcrowded cities such as New York and London faced a severe sustainability issue. Goods, people, mail, rubbish etc. were transported by horses. There were around 50,000 horses in London. In New York, the 3.5 million inhabitants had 170,000 horses. Each horse produces 20 kg manure and 1 litre of urine every day. It was too much to use the organic manure for agriculture, there was no means to clear the streets from the excrements or horse carcasses. Excrements and corpses attracted rats and insects. These sustainability issues called for the first international congress of urban planning which was aborted without any solution after three days.

The invention of the car finally presented a sustainable solution to reduce the catastrophic pollution of cities. Thus, people acted responsibly in terms of sustainability when they swapped hansom cabs for cars (de Durango, 2019, Johnson, 2016).

Today, however, cars are one of the sources of environmental disaster: 12 % of worldwide carbon emissions come from cars. Research and industry have been trying to find a solution for the once sustainable and today air polluting car. The electric car, powered by lithium batteries with 0-carbon emission is hailed as a panacea. However, the mining of lithium causes devastating damage to the natural environment, destruction of landscape and habitat of wildlife, contamination and huge consumption of scarce water resources in the lithium-rich mining regions. This raises the question if the lithium-powered electric car is truly an environmentally friendly solution towards sustainability (Balch, 2020).

3.2 Deontological view / conflicting duties

In the case of the electric car, the deontological approach which considers duty and action is not providing an unambiguous moral answer. We are faced with two conflicting duties: first, the duty to reduce carbon emissions to prevent climate change (SDG 13 Climate Action) (United Nations, 2020a). Second, the duty to protect the natural environment and wildlife (SDG 15 Life On Land). Thus, the deontological approach cannot provide the clear morally and responsible decision.

3.3 Teleological view / rivalling consequences

However, the teleological approach which considers the consequences of actions cannot help either. We are looking at multiple conflicting consequences. The first consequence is that of inaction: we continue to drive conventional cars powered by fossil fuels and continue to emit CO₂, however, protect the natural habitats and freshwater reserves needed for lithium mining. Alternatively, replacing combustion engines with batteries, we reduce CO₂ output and accept the harm to the natural environment caused by the mining of lithium.

There are other possible solutions to the CO₂-problem. I believe that our responsibility lies in using the knowledge available to find alternative solutions. Perhaps the concept of private car ownership needs to be overhauled? The households could give up cars, the governments and businesses could work together to provide affordable shared infrastructure. The research institutions have their role to play in education and discovery of new and innovative sustainable solutions.

3.4 Conclusion

Taking responsibility to make a morally and sustainable decision is sometimes difficult. A common example used by scholars to show this is the trolley case. Essentially the task is to decide if it is a moral decision to kill one person in order to save five other people (Cohen et al., 2014). Is there a clear right or wrong?

Whereas, it might sometimes not be easy to determine which decision is responsible towards sustainability it is, nonetheless, important to avoid collapse through extreme one road actions. There is an argument to be made for a balance between stability and change, tradition and innovation (Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013). I believe that *inaction*, avoiding any responsibility will be wrong in every case.

The example of the “horse versus car” case highlights the problem that we are not able to foresee the complete chain of consequences of our decisions and actions. The example of conventional versus electric car showcases that it is not always clear which decision and action are morally and sustainably responsible, no matter how well we assess and balance duties and consequences. The juxtaposition of these examples highlights how the responsibility in terms of sustainability has changed over time.

However, society, businesses and governments must, nonetheless, take responsibility and carefully assess duties and consequences of their decisions and actions. Finally, I believe in our shared responsibility towards the provision of education and knowledge sharing to make better, moral and responsible decisions towards a more sustainable future.

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