



“Summary of article by J. Ronald Engel: Introduction: The Ethics of Sustainable Development” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics, Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 339-342

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“Summary of article by J. Ronald Engel: Introduction: The Ethics of Sustainable Development”

(This is a summary of the introductory chapter of the book.)

In its 1987 report Our Common Future, the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development, under the leadership of Gro Harlem Brundtland, concludes that global well-being may depend on raising sustainable development to a global ethic. Exactly what this statement implies needs to be carefully examined. For example, we must ask what ecological, social, political and personal functions sustainable development serves, and how human aspirations can be reconciled with our moral obligations to other species and to the ecosystem. We must also know on what grounds sustainable development can be called a *true* ethic for humans.

THE GROWING CONCERN FOR ETHICS

Human attitudes towards development have changed fundamentally over time. The addition of a moral component, motivated by environmental concerns, is a relatively recent occurrence. However, not everyone shares the view that ethics are essential to solving the problems of the environment and poverty. Specialists, businessmen and politicians argue that economic and scientific solutions are adequate to deal with environmental and material concerns. Past experiences with moral claims invoked in the public arena have also led to skepticism with respect to any approach based on ethics. Those in charge of policy must remember, however, that in the end all political and economic arrangements must be ethically legitimate in order to survive.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ETHICS

Ethics can be defined as reflections on moral ideas and ideals. There are at least five practical reasons for the new interest in this topic; the fifth - defining a new paradigm for sustainable development - incorporates and builds on the other four.

- 1) There has been growing awareness of the important role that the moral values and beliefs of a culture play in determining human behavior, and so the assumption that science and policy formulation can be neutral and value free is being rejected. A study of ethics is necessary to understand and evaluate the moral codes of cultures.

- 2) There is a recognition that moral ideals can motivate people to act even when the costs are high. A number of environmental movements - including green consumerism, ethical investments, and voluntary simplicity - provide evidence of this.
- 3) Ethics can have a role in clarifying the values at stake in policy decisions, and offer moral reasons for pursuing different policies. Lack of a clear understanding of the moral issues involved leads to policy formulations based only on custom, personal preference, or political and technical feasibility.
- 4) Ethics can help resolve value conflicts that arise in development activities by redefining the issues so that the values in each position can be identified and reconciled. For example, the conflict between "ecocentrists" and "anthropocentrists" can be recast as an issue between values of ecological integrity and social justice, both of which are worthwhile ends that may potentially be mutually enhancing.
- 5) Ethics has an important role both as a basis for critiquing the existing dominant paradigm of global development, and in shaping the emerging paradigm of sustainable development. This paradigm shift is a product of the growing consensus in the international conservation and development communities that there are serious problems with modern industrial development and its emphasis on competition, consumption, and unlimited growth. The long-standing need to think in terms of dichotomies such as conservation versus development or humanity versus nature is being questioned. Many factors have motivated this shift, but the most important one seems to be the failure of modern societies to provide a good and sustainable way of life for all.

THE MORAL CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT¹

The primary problem for thinking in terms of a new moral paradigm and the ethics of sustainable development at a global level is that there is no common moral language for discussion and deliberation among the different cultures and religions. A common, cross-cultural set of moral principles needs to be developed as an alternative to both the resurgence of absolutism on the one hand, and widespread relativism on the other. In fact, cultural diversity can best be preserved through adoption of inclusive moral principles that promote mutual respect among all peoples and cultures. This common moral language and set of principles can be developed by drawing on the resources of each culture and religion.

A second problem is that the term sustainable development is itself ambiguous, and it is important to differentiate between two common but irreconcilable interpretations. Some people understand sustainable development to imply a genuinely new mode of development rooted in ethics, but others understand it to simply support continued growth, with no ethical content. The authors in this volume hold the first view, extending the meaning of sustainable development beyond the concepts of growth with equity or development with conservation, and developing the moral dimensions implied by the term. In its broadest sense, sustainable development can be defined as "*the kind of human activity that nourishes and perpetuates the historical fulfillment of the whole community of life on Earth.*"(10-11)

A third difficulty facing the emergence of a new ethical paradigm is the fact that the two main groups challenging the currently dominant development paradigm - advocates of alternative development and advocates of ecological integrity - are also at odds with each other. Thus, another challenge of the new paradigm of sustainable development is to bring these two groups together by merging environmental concerns into the normative discourse on development.

RELIGION, SCIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The development of modern societies has led in many cases to a growing dichotomy between religious value systems and secular scientific ones. While environmental and development issues were historically the concern of the secular system, recently there has been a surge of reaction among religious traditions to the environmental and development crises that have beset modern societies. This interest arises from the spiritual failures of human beings in modern materialistic societies, evident in the levels of greed, lust, and pursuit of pleasure and power that are observed. A path of sustainable development will require a fundamental change in humans with the help of spiritual disciplines. The mechanistic science that has dominated modern Western societies is seen by some as a primary cause of our present crisis. A new paradigm of sustainable development is needed that transforms scientific and religious systems and develops a greater mutuality between them.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

There is consensus that the concept of "individuals-in-community" is key to an understanding of sustainable development. This implies that rather than focusing on individuals or species as separate entities, they must be viewed as part of a larger whole. Our choice of world view is therefore not between the individual and the community, or between the environment and people, but between different kinds of "mixed" communities. However, ethicists from different parts of the world and different cultures still have different visions of what sustainable development means and what the emerging ecological world view should be.

AN AGENDA FOR ETHICS

Despite differences based on culture and social contexts, ethicists from around the world are elevating sustainable development to a global ethic. The first task on the agenda is to reconceptualize inherited moral ideas in such a way that they do justice to the complexity of interactions within and between biological and social communities. Simultaneously promoting social and ecological values in a moral framework is a difficult task that is too big for any individual or single group. It must therefore involve the input of ecofeminists, ecophilosophers, religious leaders, and many others. Ethicists should work with grassroots organizers so that the principles of sustainable development can be developed from the ground up. In addition, the second issue on the agenda is to determine how moral principles can be effectively implemented. Voluntary organizations and individuals working in cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary and cross-sectional coalitions can be effective in promoting moral principles and an ethical approach.

Notes

1. The sections that follow are an analysis of articles in the book. In this summary we discuss the issues raised in these articles, but not the authors associated with the ideas.