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SUSTAINABILITY IS A WORK OF JUSTICE: VIRTUE NOT DISTRIBUTION

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Summary

The argument most frequently used to justify the call for sustainability in business and life generally is based on notions of distributive justice. This paper sees a strong link between sustainability and justice, but in a different way, concerned more with the development and exercise of the virtue of justice by individuals. Sustainability is thus more personal, and is something involving personal effort. It is a work of justice.

Difficulties with the utilitarian and rights approaches to sustainability as just allocation are discussed. Sustainability is seen as a debate about purpose, about what is to be valued, and movement toward sustainability is to be achieved by a work of justice – engaging in that debate both in the local community and between communities, and developing the virtues, including justice, which will facilitate that debate.

Keywords: sustainability, justice, virtue, responsibility, intergenerational justice

The argument most frequently used to justify the call for sustainability in business and life generally is based on notions of distributive justice (see for instance Dobson 1998; Jacobs 1999; Tencati & Perrini 2011). This paper sees a strong link between sustainability and justice, but in a different way, concerned more with the development and exercise of the virtue of justice by individuals. Sustainability is thus more personal, and is something involving personal effort. It is a work of justice.

The first section in the paper provides a short restatement of the conventional view that sustainability is principally about intergenerational justice, and introduces some alternative positions. This is followed by a section in which the three main approaches to justice – utilitarian, rights and virtue – are outlined (after Cotton 2001). The third section is concerned with the argument that justice is a virtue, that it is a quality of character as well as a measure of distribution, and that this personal virtue can be developed in community. The fourth section considers the interrelationship between the virtue of justice and sustainability, and shows that both sustainability and justice require personal effort. The conclusion reinforces the argument that runs through the paper that sustainability is something to be worked at now, that a commitment to sustainability is not a wish for the future but an action in the present.

Introduction

The Club of Rome report in 1972 drew attention to the possibility that the earth faces 'Limits to growth', and that these limits might be reached within the lifetime of many of its current inhabitants unless the then equations or paths of growth were attenuated (Meadows et al. 1972). The term sustainability gained recognition and authority by its use in two United Nations sponsored activities, the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, the *Brundtland Report* (1990), and the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro. The theme of both is development, especially development for what was then called the Third World. The intergenerational element is clear and in the report's title *Our common future* and in Brundtland's definition: 'Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future' (Brundtland 1990, pp.84, 81.49). A slightly different form of this definition, found a little later in the WCED report has found much wider usage, often as a definition of sustainability in general. Under this formulation, the focus on future generations is explicit and the reference to aspirations dropped, as has the concept of seeking, resulting in the phrase 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland 1990, pp.nn, 2.1). This underpins much of the writing and practice about sustainability. It can be found in numerous books, curriculum materials, and websites, and in the sustainability reporting guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI 2006). On this approach,

'Futurity: an explicit concern about the impact of current activity on future generations' and equity are core ideas in the discussion of sustainability (Jacobs 1999, p.26).

This approach to the definition of sustainability is contested. This point did not go unnoticed by the WCED team as they included in their report a comment by a speaker at public hearings conducted by them in Sao Paulo as they prepared their report. The unidentified person told the Commission, 'You talk very little about life, you talk too much about survival' (Brundtland 1990, p.84). In a similar vein Amartya Sen, has expressed concern that the emphasis is on needs and not on capabilities. He writes (Sen 2004, p.11):

The world has good reason to be grateful for the new prominence of this idea, yet it must be asked whether the conception of human beings implicit in it is sufficiently capacious. Certainly, people have 'needs', but they also have values, and, in particular, they cherish their ability to reason, appraise, act and participate. Seeing people in terms only of their needs may give us a rather meagre view of humanity.

Another concern (of which more later) is that the WCED definition does not provide any guidance on what is to be distributed justly across generations. Some activists in the environmental justice movement argue that 'the environment is a particular form of goods and bads that society must divide among its members' (Dobson 1998, p.20) while other environmentalists have wider concerns such as the preservation of wilderness (Carter 2009, p.449), and supporters of the triple bottom line will be concerned about an even broader canvas including social and economic sustainability as well as the environment. That we do not know what the needs, let alone the aspirations, of future generations will be makes it difficult to decide what we should constrain, or distribute. This may be one reason why there are so many definitions of sustainability – the number exceeded 300 and was still rising when Dobson (1998) did a count over a decade ago.

Approaches to justice

This paper accepts, after Jacobs (1999), that the future and equity are important elements in the concept of sustainability and that sustainability and justice are linked, but not that the relevant linkage mechanism is to be found in the concept of (intergenerational) distributive justice. I will argue that by considering justice as a virtue a broader notion of sustainability will be fostered, one in which individuals today will be engaged, and perhaps working hard. Before embarking on that argument it is necessary to outline the three main approaches to justice – utilitarian, rights and virtue. The description that follows is based on the introduction provided by Michael Sandel who describes ideas behind these three ways of thinking about justice as 'maximising welfare, respecting freedom, and promoting virtue' (2009, p.6).

Under the popular definition sustainability means that the needs of both current and future generations will be met. In a utilitarian approach to ethical decision making the goal will be to maximise welfare. If this approach is adopted to assist in the understanding and practice of sustainability questions will arise as to what is to be included in the calculation of welfare, as to the time period over which the maximisation of welfare is to be sought, and as to the extent that the distribution of welfare is to be taken into account both within any one generation and across generations. If future generations have an uncompromised ability to meet their needs that would seem to suggest that they will be able to achieve a level of welfare at least equal to that of the present generation or that they will have a modified set of needs, perhaps having cut their coat to match their cloth. But is that just? The concern is for a just allocation.

Another approach is to focus attention on freedom and to say that the most important element to be sustained is human freedom, without which there can be no justice. Some might consider the key freedom to be provided by the opportunity to participate in a free market and to make free choices in it, including choices about what to value. Others, after Kant, might consider the central freedom to be the capacity to choose under which rule they should live. Thus for sustainability this approach to ethical decision making will tend more to focus on the maintenance of certain fundamental rights. As Sandel notes, 'making sense of Kant is not only a philosophical exercise; is also a way of examining some of the key assumptions implicit in our public life' (2009, p.104).

The third approach is concerned not with the justice that is demonstrated in an appropriate level or measure of welfare, or the justice demonstrated in the existence of certain freedoms or rights, but with that quality of character known as justice, one of the virtues 'on which the good society depends' (Sandel 2009, p.8).

At this stage I will note some of the difficulties which come from using either the utilitarian or the rights approaches when considering the link between sustainability and justice. The conventional definition holds that sustainability is about just allocation. Basing sustainability in utility makes it a matter of calculation rather than principle. If that is so then it lessens the grounds on which sustainability can make a moral claim on individuals (and society). If sustainability is not a principle to be fought for or defended, but the result of a calculation, then its attraction will be lessened. In the context of sustainability utilitarianism is not only subject to the criticism that there is no single measure available with which to calculate the various individual utility functions, but to the added difficulty that any calculation involving intergenerational justice will have to span long periods of time.

If, as Nozick (1993) for instance argues, each individual has a right to make a free choice about what they value, then the concept of intergenerational justice is perhaps thwarted, deprived of any power to move society toward a goal of sustainability. Each can make his or her own decision as to what needs (and aspirations, even capabilities) to seek in the present, but the needs which the future generation will be meeting cannot be foretold. That makes it difficult to justify or to mount any coordinated effort to protect or develop a particular element of society or the environment. That applies as much to action by government or some other authority to enforce actions in support of sustainability as it does to any autonomously evolving campaign. Rawls establishes a right to just distribution in the deliberations of the 'original position' where no-one knows their ultimate status in society (Rawls 1972), but this still leaves open how things are to be valued.

It is to this difficulty in determining what is to be valued that the virtue approach can make a contribution. On the one hand, virtue, like utilitarianism and rights does not have a universally accepted position on what should be valued it does have a process for investigation. The virtue approach involves cultivating the attitudes and dispositions on which society depends and 'reasoning about the common good' (Agosto, Gasson & Atwood 2008, p.8). This is both an individual and a communal activity, personally cultivating virtue and collectively debating the right way to value things. As I will argue below, both these are important elements of sustainability.

A disadvantage or difficulty of the virtue approach is that it is personally demanding in a way that the other two approaches are not. No longer is sustainability something I can commit to and perhaps follow some rules or possibly burdensome strictures in support of it. It is work, for the discussion and cultivation requires work by both individuals and communities. Having the discussion about what to value is work as much as personally cultivating a disposition toward justice.

Justice as a virtue

The linking of justice with issues of sustainability and distribution brings to the fore the social role and organisational nature of justice. It is here that Rawls begins *A theory of justice*, calling it 'the first virtue of social institutions' and making 'the basic structure of society' its primary subject (Rawls 1971, p.3). However it is the idea of justice as an individual virtue that is the focus of this paper. That particular virtue or moral excellence is principally concerned with 'moral issues having to do with goods or property' (Slote 2010) and the concept can be traced back at least as far as Plato.

This 'conception of individual justice...ties justice (acting justly) to an internal state of a person rather than to (adherence to) social norms or good consequences' (Slote 2010), thereby rejecting the utilitarian and rights/freedom approaches and making it an example of the virtue approach. Put in perhaps simpler terms, 'only the just can know what justice is' (Hamilton 1961) or 'we become just by acting justly' (Aristotle,[c330BC] 1953, p.2:1). Both these statements point to the dynamic nature of the moral virtues, that they can be developed through practice and from example. This will be important when considering sustainability as a *work* of justice.

The purpose of the *polis*, the engagement of individuals in the life of the society or state, is 'to form good citizens and cultivate good character' (Sandel 2009, p.193). To determine which virtues are to be honoured and rewarded in society involves reason and argument, to determine the 'goods internal to practices' (MacIntyre 1985, p.198) which contribute to the growth and enjoyment of the individual undertaking some practice and seeking to do it well. Aristotle's examples range from the practical in the playing of flutes through the building of houses to the development of courage and the capacity to act justly. The purpose of every art, job, or practice, he argues (Aristotle,[c330BC] 1985? , p.3.8), is some

good. To determine its value we need to understand its purpose or essential nature, in the sense that the purpose of flutes is to be played well. I would argue then that the purpose of sustainability is to allow, encourage and enhance the good society and its physical, intellectual and moral virtues. Sustainability is a debate about purpose.

The journey aspect – working toward sustainability

The fourth section considers the interrelationship between the virtue of justice and sustainability, and shows that both sustainability and justice require personal effort.

The first Brundtland definition included an aspect of incompleteness and mission – ‘sustainable development seeks to meet...’ – which is lost in the second and much more widely used statement that sustainability ‘meets the needs...’ (Brundtland 1990, pp.84, nn). The active verb ‘seeks’ with its connotation of expeditions and discovery has been replaced by the passive ‘meets’ with the implication that the task has already been achieved. The idea that we should be “working toward” justice and sustainability not only acknowledges that this is unfinished business requiring an ongoing effort but also recognises that there is no sufficiently well-defined set of universal values with which to assess the relative merit of trees, jobs and health.

This plurality of values in the contemporary world could be used as a reason to do little if anything to seek out more than the broadest of definition of sustainability, sustainability light, as it were. Support could be found in at least two arguments – that failure is certain and so any effort would be wasted, or that it would be a repudiation of individual freedom to seek to change another person’s view of the relative worth of those various things which are held to be valuable. Virtue provides grounds for rejecting this do-little approach. Both Aristotle and MacIntyre point to the personal benefit which can come as one seeks to develop moral virtue and understand purpose. For Aristotle, to be a better person, to have a virtue or any number of them more deeply than before, or to understand more clearly how particular virtues that one has relate to each other and to the whole, giving reason to engage in the development of one’s moral capabilities even if of no immediate use.

Where there are goods internal to the practices then there will be a benefit for the practitioner even when the intended external goal is not met. MacIntyre acknowledges the importance of flow and time when he writes, ‘I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ (1985, p.201). That there are multiple stories, that each of us might be part of more than one is a challenge, an opportunity to exercise reason, rather than an invitation to inaction.

The plural society need not inhibit debate, indeed it heightens the need for the development of virtue and the capacity for reflection (Harris 2008). Furthermore, Gardner (2010) argues that, even where there is widespread acceptance of a multiplicity of views about what constitutes truth, beauty and goodness, engagement in a ‘movement toward’ truth is essential if truth and society are to be sustained. The questions raised by any examination of what is meant by sustainability and how it is to be achieved cannot be answered without consideration of ethics, and ‘our debates about justice unavoidably embroil us in substantive moral questions’ (Sandel 2009, p.243). Thus an attempt or desire to introduce a form or process of sustainable allocation on the basis of equivalence will lead to consideration of whether the future generations will (or should) attribute the same value to the item being allocated as we do in this generation. Those in Gen Y, we are told, have different values, honour and reward different virtues to those from the Babyboomer generation. Is it sustainable that what is sustained changes from generation to generation? Sandel acknowledges the link between allocation, value and justice when he writes: ‘Justice is not only about the right way to distribute things, it is about the right way to value things’ (2009, p.261).

...a work of justice

This section of the paper discusses the nature and value of the work involved when sustainability is considered to be a work of justice. It draws on MacIntyre (1985, 1988) and the notion of goods internal to practices to show how such work can contribute to personal fulfilment, result in tangible benefits to society and enhance engagement in a community, all at the same time.

Both MacIntyre and Aristotle tell us, from their positions over 2,000 years apart, that the cultivation of virtue is not easy; it requires practice. This is part of the work of justice. Any moral virtue in its desired state lies in a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency, courage for instance between rashness and cowardice, justice between the extremes of giving too much and too little. As this mean is not an arithmetic mean the finding of it requires the application of reason, and engagement in a process of moral decision making. One aspect of the work is participation with others in the process. Earlier I referred to unavoidable debates. Participating in those debates – enunciating a position, listening intently to different views, seeking common ground – requires effort.

It may be that the debate is conducted through stories, as different tales capture the reality of variations in the value and honour attached to specific items at different times and in different places. The work is not only in the telling of the story for sometimes the story will become real and its implementation unavoidable. Telling the story, looking after it and nurturing it is a responsibility, for 'you can't really take pride in your country [or profession, or wilderness] and its past if you're unwilling to acknowledge any responsibility for carrying its story into the present, and discharging the moral burdens that may come with it' (Sandel 2009, p.235).

This has implications for ethics education and sustainability education throughout the education system, organisations and society. Where case studies are used the cases should be chosen to encourage debate rather than unalloyed condemnation or praise for one participant at the expense of another. Cases where the same item – a stream, the companionship of domestic animals, the classics of art and literature, for instance – is valued differently by a number of different participants in the case, and where there is a matrix of stakeholders and valued goods, will provide a greater opportunity to discuss what is necessary to maintain the society and the environment for generations to come than two-party, A against B, cases. Case studies can be put to a number of purposes; open-ended cases can invite the search for a solution, others may be chosen to demonstrate the application of a particular theory or principle, some may be examples of good practice or the consequences of despicable behaviour. In the teaching of ethics, especially to adults, cases which allow and encourage those studying it to examine how the participants responded to the conflicts of values and the interplay of internal and external goods have been found particularly effective (O'Donovan 2002).

Conclusion

Although the most common framing of sustainability is in terms of intergenerational (distributive) justice, that view is open to criticism both practical and conceptual. It will be more helpful, I argue, to consider justice as an individual virtue than as a social virtue. On this basis sustainability is something to be worked at now; a commitment to sustainability is not a wish for the future but an action in the present.

Sustainability is a debate about purpose, a debate about what to value in a world where there are wide differences about how some goods are to be valued. That debate occurs both within communities and between communities. Understanding the traditions which have led to the practices of the community in which one is placed, and of the other communities with which one engages in a search for sustainability will be enhanced by a disposition to openness and to justice.

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