

The Ethics of Sustainability, Globalization, and Nature

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Globalization has long been an effector of change on cultures and, more recently, on states. The impact of globalization on such human pursuits as business and international relations has been tremendous; what is questionable is whether such effects are beneficial – or sustainable. This paper examines the ethics of such interactions from the standpoints of globalization’s proponents and opponents, and from those of both the advocates of sustainability and its detractors. Ethical conclusions are offered regarding the viability of sustainability in the face of globalization.

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In order to discuss meaningfully the ethics of the system at hand, or of any situation, one must have a clear understanding of the concept. At the risk of some tedium, it would seem worthwhile at this point to review the meaning of the inter-related terms *ethics*, *morals*, *values*, *obligation*, *rights*, *duties*, *justice*, *society*, and *culture*. These terms, and their relationships, will serve as the premisses¹ for the line of reasoning to follow.

According to Velasquez (1999, 16), who draws on established literature on the topic, **ethics** refers to that branch of philosophy concerned with

...our values and moral principles and how these relate to our conduct and to our social institutions. Ethics includes questions about the nature of moral obligation, what basic moral principles we should follow and what is good for human beings, the nature and justification of social structures and political systems, and the morality of various kinds of behavior and social policies that involve crucial human interests.

Clearly, **morality** is at the heart of ethics. Indeed, Velasquez (1999, 496) confirms, again by drawing on the established literature, that “morality is the subject matter that ethics studies,” and explains that “morality consists of the standards that an individual or a group has about what is right and wrong and good and evil.” “Moral standards,” he continues, “are ideals that people try

¹ The spelling of this term has become *de rigueur* in philosophical writing. The new spelling serves to differentiate the term, a logical operator, from its homonym *premises*, which usually refers to a place or places.

to live up to....and deal with matters to which we attach great importance.” *Values*, following Velasquez (1999) and others, is the term for those “matters of great importance;” it refers specifically to the assignation, or attachment, of importance to such matters. Moral standards, or simply morals, are thus the basis of the rules that guide human conduct (norms), and the stick against which such conduct is measured; the rules are assembled (and often codified in law) in an attempt to channel decision making in accordance with a system of morality; and ethics is the examination of such systems.

By such reasoning, adherents to a system of morality would appear to have an **obligation** to try to act according to the rules of the system. To some (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to name a few), this obligation is the defining characteristic of membership in a **society**; society, by corollary, is defined by its system of morality. To the extent that such moral obligation limits the choices to action available to society’s members, it places something of a **burden** on such membership. Yet, the rules are not arbitrary; rather, they are based upon the values of the culture in which the society is enmeshed – they are matters to which importance is attached. (Just as a society is determined by its system of morality, a **culture** is determined by its system of values. See Lechner & Boli [2003] for examples.) When a breach of such obligation occurs, some other member of society will, in theory, be adversely affected. The affected member will naturally object that she is entitled to certain expectations as a member of society, inasmuch as she holds up her end of the deal. When her expectations are not fulfilled, she is understandably disappointed, and her complaint must be honored by society. For that is the very crux of the agreement – membership conveys certain privileges, or *rights*. Society could not long endure if its rules of conduct were haphazardly enforced; motivation to accept society’s burdens would become severely diminished. When undue burden is imposed upon a member due to the actions

of another, the burden must be redistributed to reestablish parity within the system. This redistribution of burden is generally acknowledged as *justice*. When claims to rights are recognized, and to the extent that such claims are accepted by society, certain bearers of society's burdens may have a *duty* to specific performance, pursuant to its obligations as a member, ensuring that such rights-claims are honored (Orend 2002).

Environmental issues demand special attention within the purview of ethics. Societies, after all, must have places to exist; the qualities of such locales determine, to a large extent, the measure to which societies can function. Both as an area of habitation and as a resource bank, the environment in which a society resides takes on enormous significance in terms of its stability and capacity for continuity. Such considerations are necessarily "matters of great importance;" as such, there should be little argument over the "value" of such discourse. To the extent that the actions of a society impact the environment in which it exists, morality – the system by which a society conducts itself – is eminently at issue with respect to environmental concerns. It is a society's duty *to itself* to carefully assess the effects of its own actions. If a society finds that it has, by its actions, impaired its own environment, it must be prepared to bear the additional burden imposed by the resultant limited capacity to act in the future. To the extent that such additional burden might be reallocated, the situation demands justice, within the society itself. The rights of society as a whole are at stake. It is further a society's duty to itself to assure that its own rights-claims are acknowledged and respected, lest the very validity of the society becomes questionable. This being the case, the very conditions in which ethics can be conducted -- namely societies -- are at issue. There can, thus, be no matter of greater import *to ethics itself*. The situation is entirely reflexive; society must peer into its own murky reflection

as ethics studies its own moral predicament. Environmental ethics is, perforce, its own strongest proponent.

What, then, are the ethical considerations inherent in the question of the practicability of sustainability in the face of globalization? Answers may be gleaned by identifying the various positions in play, and by determining what is at stake for each of the holders of those positions.

In re Sustainability

Proponents of sustainability espouse a very basic philosophy: it is incumbent upon the current generation to assure that future generations have the same, or greater, capacity to flourish in their environment as the current generation enjoys in its environment (adapted from Brundtland 1987). There is an inherent advocacy in this position, as there is a projected rights-claim being made on behalf of future generations. The problems with such advocacy are readily apparent. Can future generations have full rights in the context of the present? If so, can such claims carry the same weight as the conflicting claims of others made now? By what reasoning might such conflicts be resolved? Certainly, there is precedent for the notion that the current generation has enough problems, and that preceding generations in fact left them to solve their own problems. If this was sufficient reasoning then, why should it be different now? Might not future generations enjoy currently-unknowable benefits of technology, such that problems perceived today might be non-issues in the years ahead? In fact, isn't such innovation the most likely scenario? And if faith in technology flags, there is still faith in God's capacity to take care of his own.² God made earth, God made humans, so isn't this God's bailiwick? Such debates are highly complex, and raise age-old questions spanning the whole of philosophy across the ages.

² These contentions, as phrased, would seem to apply only to monotheists. The emphasis, however, is not in reference to any particular religion, but to the shift in faith from technology to deity. Similar shifts in faith (from technology to deity) might be observed in followers of polytheistic, pantheistic, or animist religions; the effect would be the same.

In the last analysis, the questions seem ultimately to boil down to the purpose of humankind, the purpose of life, and the purpose of existence. From such an impasse, it is difficult to see how any further discourse may be held, much less meaningful resolution reached. But whatever decisions societies reach regarding their sustainability, now or in the future, what must be true is that *something* will happen. Societies have crashed in the past, and will likely continue to do so. The difference today is the degree to which societies are interdependent, each increasingly reliant upon the responsible practices and good will of every other to ensure a safe and reasonable environment in which to exist. Proponents of sustainability are thus not demanding so much of individuals, or even individual societies; what is called for is a radical new understanding of the world as a single ecosystem, by (prospective) members of a global society.

Looked at in this light, sustainability advocates might reasonably welcome the homogenizing effects of globalization. Cultural value differences that result in various and disparate levels of awareness of the scope of the enviro-ethical problem are fast being subsumed in the flood of cross-cultural products and information in which they are inundated. The sheer quantity of new things and ideas sweeping across the global cultural landscape is bewildering to even the most seasoned; surely, it is sufficient to shake the shackles of culture off the ignorant and the reticent. Surely, there must emerge a new, all-encompassing global *Weltanschauung*³ sufficient to respond as a single, globally-effective force toward a sustainable present, and offer hope for a sustainable future. For in the hearts and minds of the proponents of sustainability, it would seem nothing less will suffice. Global effects demand global efforts; if globalization is the answer, then let it proceed with all due haste.

This, indeed, mirrors the attitude of those that might be considered “opponents” of sustainability efforts. To the extent that sustainability projects impede the forward motion of

³ Worldview; also, mindset.

globalization, they contend, the effort backfires. True, enduring sustainability is clearly in the best interest of all; there is no possible way to make mass extinction, for example, politically or economically attractive. But the conditions that result in such unfortunate outcomes are only exacerbated by misplaced efforts to impose some fleeting level of local sustainability. If only globalization could be allowed to run its course, a true level of stable sustainability would be ensured by the invisible hand of economics, and the concerted efforts of a unified global culture.

In re Globalization

Proponents of globalization offer a most positive take on the advantages of being able to produce anything, anywhere, and to market those same products anywhere, in almost no time at all (see discussions in Lechner & Boli 2003, Keeling 2004). The abundance of newly accessible human capital, in conjunction with newly available resources, is bound to produce vast new wealth on a global scale, they suggest, with new opportunities for the global community to prosper as never before. Trickle-down economics will assure that the average standard of living in even the most remote parts of the world will rise, and continue to rise (Dollar and Kraay 2003). It's raining soup – grab a bucket!⁴

Some suggest, however, that the much-touted advantages to globalization are not panning out (see, e.g. the arguments in Lechner & Boli 2003, Keeling 2004). Non-renewable resources are being removed from the poorest regions at next-to-zero cost, forever removing any hope of those regions' capacity to develop them independently. Manufacturing firms, IT sector companies, bottling companies, etc. are now free to move their plants to wherever the labor is cheapest, forcing increasing numbers of laborers to work for ever-lower wages in the so-called “race to the bottom” (Brecher & Costello 1998). The very sovereignty of states is being challenged as multi-national corporations influence the economies of entire regions, and enjoy a commensurate level

⁴ As once suggested by Robert Heinlein, in reference to the abundance of solar energy in space.

of political clout – often without the impedance of regulation. When the worth of such a corporation is greater than the entire GDP of a host nation, the end result may be that the corporation writes its own rules. Some would have it that globalization has, indeed, defeated state sovereignty, concluding that “in terms of real flows of economic activity, nation states have *already* lost their role as meaningful units of participation in the global economy of today’s borderless world” (Ohmae 2003, 214). Further, critics of globalization (see Barber 2003) bewail the loss of cultural identity, as products and information, entertainment, clothing styles and cuisine assail the bastions of once-remote and exotic locales, hopelessly diluting and corrupting their unique cultural beauty. The anticipated advantages of globalization may be in the process of fruition; but such fruits are, at this point in the process, accessible to but a few (Keeling 2004). The majority of those impacted by globalization are being marginalized, forced into ever-greater depths of poverty, bereft of the social stability of effective states, and shorn of the cultural values which give their lives meaning.

Globalization is certainly a mixed bag of blessings; all that can really be said of it is that it is real, and inexorable. The changes imparted in the process appear to leave target societies breathless with the rate at which they occur. There is frequently little time in which to examine consequences, offer objections, or respond in any coherent manner whatsoever. The scale at which such changes are being imparted, globally, is difficult for even the most attuned to grasp, or to track. Globalization is the final stage in the transformation of earth into the realm of humanity.

The Ethics of Sustainability and Globalization

Given the structure of the ethics as defined, and the positions of the various “players” in the discourse, it should be a relatively straightforward endeavor to establish normative prescriptions

for each. Throughout the long and fascinating history of philosophical inquiry, there have been proposals that might be invoked in this case to unnecessarily complicate our examination. Questions of utilitarianism (such as Mill's [1863]) are a prime example, as various attempts to quantify, or otherwise evaluate, the relative worth of this action or that outcome muddy the waters of reason. Further, entire systems of pre-muddled, artificially-induced values are often called upon to provide "answers" to these important questions; religions of fact and fancy, technology and devotionism each offer their own version of "truth," applicable to any issue with satisfyingly ambiguous results. This is not to disparage the intrinsic value of these and similar pursuits; each has its place in history and within the cultural matrix. But, like any other tool, these lines of reasoning may have limited applicability in various circumstances. (Consider the specific utility of a screwdriver when the task at hand is the replacement of a light bulb.) Finally, propositions that invoke "just so" solutions, such as divine command theories, any version of "manifest destiny," or (especially) radical determinism are herein dismissed forthwith. Should there be any shred of validity to such notions, then this entire discussion is at least moot, and likely presumptuous in the extreme.

To review, it has been established herein that moral systems are the determinants of societies, and are based upon the value systems of the cultural matrices in which societies occur. Membership in society confers certain privileges, or rights, and demands the bearing of certain burdens; further, such burdens are subject to reallocation when they fall out of balance. Finally, it has been demonstrated that the ethical examination of environmental issues is of paramount importance to societies, and to ethics itself. This meta-system, it is hoped, is internally consistent and sufficiently complete. The emphasis of this section, it must be recalled, is one of

an ethical examination, even while the focus is ultimately upon the sustainability of the concept and practicability of sustainability in the face of globalization.

Religion's Contribution

While religion might not be a particularly valuable tool with which to ethically examine environmental problems, it must be recognized as a cultural template. Religion is a reflection of a culture's system of values; moral edicts often stem from religious tenets. Policy is frequently established on the basis of religious precepts, and environmental policy is no exception. Biblical admonitions⁵ to "fill the earth, and subdue it," and to "be fruitful, and multiply," for example, have provided the outline of a program of consumption and growth for five thousand years of monotheism.⁶ For the purposes of our discussion, religion serves best not as a lens through which to examine environmental ethics, but rather, as a roadmap of the social and cultural byways through which our ethical examination must negotiate.

To the extent that religious outlooks may meliorate "new" moralities, by variously emphasizing and/or de-emphasizing this or that value-tenet, religion has the capacity to work in favor of a new paradigm. The potential for sustainability might be placed on a pedestal, such that its immediate import and significance was apparent to all. New impetus to assure the possibility of continuity, and the capacity to thrive, now, and far into the future, might conceivably be inspired in society. To those swayed by the afore-mentioned passages from Genesis, for example, it might be pointed out that God made the Earth, and all other living things, *before* He made man. Should this not confer some priority on nature as a whole? Monotheists across the world might be encouraged to interpret God's admonition to fill the earth

⁵ See Genesis 1: 28.

⁶ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all derived from these common-source principles.

as a signal that there must be maintained the capacity to do so. Religion, in the right hands, might accomplish much in the way of achieving a mindset suitable for sustainability.

Conversely, religious emphasis may be placed on the necessity to homogenize disparate worldviews, under the guise of saving the souls of the world. By such reasoning, there is little need to save the earth, if the souls of the world are saved; the utility of the earth would, at that point, be minimal. A yet more extreme application is in the idea that those souls that have, to date, been saved are sufficient...and that the “end times” might, or even should be, *encouraged*. Compilers of the so-called Rapture Index (Rapture Ready, 2005) and their followers appear to be anxious for just such an outcome, breathlessly awaiting the moment when the figure exceeds the value they have established to signal the advent of Armageddon. No system of morality, inspired by religion or anything else, could possibly be more unsustainable.

Cases have been made for the relative gentleness with which various religions address nature; there is, for instance, much to be said for Judaic admonitions against needless destruction (Gordis 1990). But such examples always point back to the utility of nature, making direct or less-direct reference to things natural as resources, emplaced for the sole benefit of humanity. Even the kindest, most gentle renderings of Christianity espouse a beneficent “stewardship” of nature by humans, as if nature required such services from one of its newest members. In contrast, various sects of Hinduism & Buddhism, notably Jainism and Shinto, respectively, have a certain reverence or respect for nature (Beverluis 2000); the same could be said for any number of animist systems of belief. Taoism recognizes a zero-sum unity in all things, and can thus be construed in a nature-friendly, “we’re all in this together” sort of way. If any of these values could be incorporated into mainstream Western thought, there might result an enduring

awareness of the importance of perceiving nature, not as a pool of resources to be consumed, but as family.

A Nod to Science & Technology

Science is a method by which to acquire new knowledge in a way that minimizes false conclusions, while still allowing for speculation. It is a specialized task, requiring discipline and, in most cases, years of training. Scientific opinions thus have the potential to carry considerable weight in society. In the social framework of the West, however, science is in the odd position of being relied upon to offer the definitive voice upon which to base policy, while, at the same time, it is often scoffed at and berated when its conclusions are at odds with pre-existing values. This condition is exacerbated by the fact that science is entirely supported by society, as scientists can almost never subsist off of the fruits of their own labor. Science thus finds itself in an uneasy truce with society; yet society continues to support science, for one reason – technology.

Technology is the application of scientific findings in ways that make human endeavors more productive and/or more efficient. Such applications have a maximum of instrumental value, and entire industries continually strive to make the best, most innovative uses of the latest technological offerings. Unfortunately, most technologies do not come packaged with warning labels, and the primary users of technology are not scientists. It is, therefore, no surprise that technology is often unwittingly used, misused, or overused in ways that have unintended, and often devastating, consequences. In terms of environmental impacts, technological advances have enabled societies to graduate from moving molehills in a week to moving mountains overnight. It is unfortunate that there is nothing in or about technology that tells us whether we *should* move the mountains. It is yet more unfortunate when scientists are not heeded even when

they attempt to warn of the adverse effects of technological applications; for such warnings almost always come after the fact. Once the technological cat is out of the bag, it is futile to attempt to get it back in. All that can be hoped for is a measure of restraint.

Finding ways to compel such restraint is, in the latter days of the age of globalization, especially challenging. For there doesn't appear to be any particular reason to slow the pace of market expansion and exploitation; remember, it's raining soup. If technologies in transportation and communication facilitate the boom, how can moderation be justified in the face of an unrestrained, global free-market economy? To slow down is to be out-competed, and replaced by another with no compunctions about ignoring the purported benefits of restraint. Failure to cut all of the trees, or catch all of the fish, today, simply ensures that someone else will. It is the tragedy of the commons extended to global proportions. Unlike any previous period in history, however, the misuse of the commons cannot be mediated with knowing looks or snide mutterings. The global village doesn't accommodate such social niceties; culprits are free to take as much, as fast, as their technology (and sheer guile) enables them to. There is no council to hear grievances, no court to deliver justice, no stocks in which to do penance; there are only the brutal laws of economics to guide societies. There is no restraint, because there cannot be.

Science, however, cannot be blamed for this unfortunate state of affairs. When the attention of science is turned to such mundane matters at all, it is, at most, articulate as a bearer of bad news. If anything, society might put pressure on science to come up with a solution; a way, perhaps, to accommodate the use of technology in an environmentally-friendly way. Nor can technology be held accountable. Technology is, after all, an application; it is a tool. The tool cannot be held responsible for its wielder's indiscretions. Society must look to itself for

accountability. If society cannot, or will not, address the misuse of technology, then it must be prepared to lie in its own bed, and perhaps, to die there.

So, What's the Problem?

In a word, population. But population has drastically different connotations for each of our positions. Population is an essential component of the globalization equation, for instance, even to the demographic composition of the population. Markets can only thrive if they are growing, and the market in question is global in scope. Thus, the world population must either grow, or there must be greater planet-wide, per-capita consumption. In the question of sustainability, population is actually a rather moot point, as long as the population, at whatever level or rate of growth, can be sustained long into the future without reducing the quality and texture of the global environment. Even from some hypothetical position of Nature, if the human population significantly overshoots the limits set by its capacity to maintain itself in a stable environment, the population will decline, probably rather abruptly. Should the population fall to levels below that minimum required to maintain a stable breeding population, the species is likely to join the bloated ranks of the extinct. The dictates of Malthus thus satisfied, Nature (as hypothecated) won't shed a tear in any case.

This is worth summarizing. Of the three perspectives, only one, globalization, has an active interest in population, and that interest is toward population growth. The other two have no particular position with respect to population per se, but do have an interest in a stable global environment. Globalization has no such interest, except insofar as such stability might, from time to time, result in an economic advantage. In theory, this disparity of interests might actually present no conflict at all, as long as globalization had no impact on environmental stability, and neither nature nor sustainability had any impact on population growth. In point of fact, all of

these interactions can and do take place. The impacts of globalization on environmental stability, in particular, present us with an irreconcilable problem. The situation is worsened by globalization's insistence that the population either grow, or consumption be increased, as, from a sustainability point of view, these are identical propositions. Something has to give.

In Conclusion

Ethics is a rather aloof way to approach issues that are often of a volatile nature. Indeed, the more intense the debate as to what should be done in a given situation, the more readily applicable ethical examination becomes. In all of history, few issues compare to the question of sustainability in the 21st century, as the stakes are so high as to be total. Only the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation, but a few decades ago, can really compare; at that, it is questionable whether that threat wasn't itself part of the issue of sustainability. Ethics has never had a higher calling than today.

Globalization is the ultimate economic phenomenon. Its working base includes every people, every patch of earth, every erg of energy, and every increment of currency on the planet. No song is immune to its effects; no slightest scrap of food escapes its consideration. No hour of labor is outside its purview. It is the largest, most extreme expression of capitalism possible. It is a process whose goal is to extract the maximum in profit from market disparities in every corner of the earth. Globalization's appetite cannot be sated until global economic equilibration is achieved, down to the last iota of value. What this means, however, is that each and every item of worth is subject to globalization's market mentality. No slightest bit of culture is exempt. Cuisines are subject to sales, and if they can be made more marketable by changing them, they will be changed. The same can be said for clothing styles, or even languages. Religions, too, are subject to market manipulation. Globalization is not an organization; it

cannot be addressed in any meeting or forum.⁷ It is a socio-economic phenomenon, and every society on the planet is a potential participant, regardless of its willingness. Indeed, it is when the forces of globalization encounter political or cultural resistance that they become the most visible. When the resistance dies down, as it inevitably must, globalization resumes its all-but-transparent course. Because globalization is not an entity, it has no choice in its course; it has no choices at all. For globalization is not an action, it is an effect. By our definitions, morality – the rules by which societies conduct themselves – has no application to globalization. It would be like trying to apply morality to the weather.

This effect, globalization, occurs within and between societies, specifically their economies. The impact, however, is felt at all levels, economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally; globalization knows no boundaries in this regard. Economic pressures are part of how people establish priorities in their decision making; market values affect the freedom of choice people have. Such pressures also have the effect of opening doors which might previously have been barred. A mountain may be sacred and inviolate until a rare mineral deposit is discovered; at that point, the decision as to whether to extract the mineral is a matter of price negotiation. It would seem that societies' freedom of choice is so sharply reduced in the face of globalization, that considerations of morality are all but moot. If there is no choice, there cannot be morality.

Yet, as has been discussed above, a system of morality is the determinant of a society. If a circumstance arises wherein choice is not available, wherein there is only one possible course of action, then the system of morality ceases to function in that circumstance. To that extent, in that circumstance, the determinant of society ceases to function. Thus, society is a situation-dependent phenomenon, and can become indeterminate – cease to exist – in certain

⁷ The Bretton-Woods institutions and the WTO are certainly participant in globalization. But only the wildest conspiracy theory would credit these organizations with anything so ponderous as charting the course of globalization.

circumstances. And globalization places societies in precisely these circumstances. More explicitly stated, following the definitions and relationships discussed herein, it may be concluded that *societies cease to exist in the context of globalization*.

In the absence of society's structures, what remains is culture, i.e. the values that a people considers important. In the context of globalization, a 'people' is left without a coherent society, awash in the sea of its own values. Yet, as has been discussed, globalization targets precisely these values as objects of market manipulation. The end result is that the values that determine a culture are warped into marketable shape, packaged, and sold – anywhere, in next to no time at all. Unbeknownst to the erstwhile members of society, there is no residuum of privilege adherent in their bereft position. They have no benefits of membership, as, in that condition, there is no society from which to derive rights. By extension, there can be no duties, no burdens to respect circumstantially non-existent rights. Further, there is no possibility of reallocating non-burdens; thus, there can be no justice in the face of globalization.

This reduces the ethical examination of globalization to a sharp, clear, single point. The necessary conclusion for ethics, in the examination of systems of morality with respect to globalization, is that there is nothing to examine. There is no system of globalization morality; nor is there the potential for any.

A final look at the question, the ethical question, of the viability of sustainability in the face of globalization, is in order. Options in the examination are now severely constrained; what remains is the question of whether there is anything left to discuss at all. And recall, there can be no topic, in the entire purview of ethics, as important as the discussion of environmental ethics. At such moments as society has the opportunity for ethical considerations along these lines, in other words, when it isn't ensconced in its globalization pursuits, it may behoove it to at least

recognize what is happening to its environmental integrity, even as it acknowledges that there is absolutely nothing it can do about it. This act, which may well prove to be among its last, is, indeed, optional. There would appear to be no duty to make such an examination, as society appears not to have any rights to understand its own demise.

And the trees continue to fall.

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