

CHALLENGING SUSTAINABILITY: FROM DECONSTRUCTION TO RECONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT: In recent decades the concept of sustainability has gained great prominence in the public debate and academic research as well. Today, it is a fundamental concept to address the complex crisis we are facing at planetary scales. However, after several decades, its definition is still associated with vague and ambiguous notions that are ultimately decimating its role as a guiding framework for a more sustainable living. There is still an important gap between its *theory* and its *praxis*. The article generates a philosophical deconstruction of the sustainability concept as a necessary action to address this difficulty. This examination allows to philosophically reconstruct fundamental characteristics of its content. The article suggests and argues that a relevant component of sustainability is its regulatory function in the sphere of human relations. It suggests that sustainability is a regulative idea that works as a guide – a working concept – in the case of dilemmas that stem from the problem of maintaining responsibility towards future generations and the environment. From this standpoint, the article explores key aspects of sustainability as an ethically grounded concept and finally reflects about some applicative and educational implications.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability Ethics; Regulative Ethics; Environmental Ethics; Arne Næss

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability is often associated with economic and environmental political agendas. However, despite the functional role it plays in public policy, its exact definition is not clear. This article attempts to philosophically deconstruct of the concept of sustainability (section 2) and

formally evaluate it (sections 3 and 4), in order to reconstruct it based on certain essential characteristics of its fundamental content (section 5). Finally, some educational ideas are presented (section 6) in order to provide a more practical and effective concept of sustainability.

DECONSTRUCTING SUSTAINABILITY

The concept of sustainability is often associated with vague and ambiguous notions, since “the term has become a corporate buzzword, applied so commonly and ubiquitously that it has become simply ‘a synonym for everything that is positive’” (Morelli 2001, 2). It appears that, “to some extent the term sustainability has become almost meaningless” (Russ 2010, 3). However, this is not reason enough to dismiss the concept of sustainability as an insignificant term, nor belittle its value for guiding public policy. It is also possible that an exceedingly scientific or regulative focus has neutralized its critical and ethical value in the face of global changes. Is sustainability an exclusively regulative concept, void of well-defined content? Is it solely a concept that serves to orient certain practices impacting on the environment (i.e., an indicator), or is it a concept that simultaneously describes and establishes a critical position regarding the current state of things?

For instance, the concept of sustainability has been disseminated and popularized by many different kinds of institutions and people from around the world over the past three decades (Cardonna 2014). Nevertheless, there is a significant gap between its theory and its praxis. If sustainability is the only possible path for global society to follow in the 21st century, it is essential to fill this gap and propose a framework capable of transcending it.

These issues require a serious analysis of the concept of sustainability itself in order to better understand it on an epistemological level. Philosophical deconstruction (McQuillan 2001) is a particularly useful approach for establishing this kind of concept, based on its formal aspect (that is, the disciplinary context to which it belongs) and its content (i.e., the part of reality that it is considering). Through this deconstruction, the inter-disciplinary nature of the concept can be clearly discerned, implying that “sustainability [...] will remain a ‘moving target’ because the more we deepen and better understand the notion, new challenges

for application and operationalization will need to be overcome by scientists and practitioners” (Cruz 2007, 134). For this reason, it is necessary to understand the differing levels of the concept itself (theoretical, regulative, applicative and educational).

DO WE NEED TO RECONSTRUCT SUSTAINABILITY? A REGULATIVE IDEA

Since the publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), sustainability has generally been understood as a goal for economic, ecological, and social life. This report identified clear connections between economic growth and environmental sustainability policies, based on the management of natural environments (WCED 1987, 108-109). In addition, the report urged governments to enact policies aimed at promoting a form of development that could be both economically and ecologically sustainable. One of the main thrusts of the report was that development may only be considered as being sustainable if it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, 8).

The report also developed a triangular *model of sustainable development*, connecting three variables: People, Planet and Profit, which are known as “the 3 P’s” (Pope *et al.* 2004). The *Profit* variable has been interpreted (in some cases) in terms of *economic prosperity*. The report maintains that economic development can be harmonized with the needs of the people in order to reduce *inequity* and increase *social wellbeing* (Glavic and Lukman 2007). This triangular interpretation of sustainable development has been strongly criticized by several authors, who consider it to be markedly anthropocentric (Michelsen *et al.* 2016, 23; Salazar 2018). Such criticism is based on the idea that this particular definition “considers the satisfaction of human needs as inherently conflictive with environmental restrictions, and as such, the habitual triangle of sustainability represents society and environment as separate ‘pillars.’ This triangle is based on the belief that nature and culture exist as a dichotomy, that can only be reconciled through economy” (Seghezzeo 2009, 542).

From here we can begin to highlight that a relevant component of sustainability is its regulatory function in the sphere of human relationships. In this section, we reconstruct the concept of sustainability to understand it as a *regulative idea* that may serve as a guide in the dilemmas and conflicts of interest that stem from the problem of maintaining responsibility towards future generations and the environment.

In following “philosophical formalism,” we will evaluate whether sustainability should be considered as a universal principle that serves a regulative function in any kind of society in order to achieve a better human future. In understanding that the regulative ideal of sustainability can only be achieved in an ideal world, this naturally leads to a particular attitude towards the “common good of humanity” (open ecosystems and their various components), as well as the relationship between present and future generations. It is necessary to consider two central issues in order to move towards a more in-depth analysis: i) what are *common goods of humanity*, and ii) *how can they be preserved* in the context of an ecological, intergenerational, and global justice?

Finally, it has been argued that a new perspective on sustainability requires a consideration of ethics that highlight human interdependence with other life forms and the planetary ecosystem. Following Stables (2013, 178), we will argue that the notion of a regulative ideal still has much to offer in the rethinking of the issue of responsibility towards future generations.

The issues that arise out of the regulative model and the ideal world that we connect to the concept of sustainability, raise two primary concerns: i) the increasing damage to, and the dramatic loss of, ecosystems and ecological services that are considered vital to the future sustainability of humanity (Wu 2013); and ii) the effects that global climate changes have on human health, especially on those communities most exposed to these impacts (Dwyer 2009). In this global scenario, certain ethical dilemmas and new questions emerge. For example, should global justice be limited only to citizens that are part of a particular political community, or should this concept also be extended to refugees and immigrants? This focus on issues relevant to the concept of sustainability leads to a particular position regarding the human person who is considered as a “cosmopolitan subject” of justice. This emphasis on global justice

as a basic regulative ideal of sustainability, entails thinking of a way to balance and harmonize the *social demands of global justice* with the conditions and criteria that make sustainability *achievable*.

As a regulative concept, sustainability can be understood as a guiding ideal that comprises a common future and provides direction in social justice and sustainable practice debates. These essential debates are related to environmental, social, and economic responsibility, and decision-making. However, despite the fact that as a society we have yet to attain sustainability, it does not imply that such a society is unattainable. In a certain sense, sustainability, understood as a regulative concept, constitutes the model (Valera and Marcos 2014) or common-sense framework upon which the thinking regarding conflicts and issues related to global justice and ecological responsibility may be based, both on a transnational and an individual level. From here it is possible to understand Lubk's (2016, 93) statement better: "Sustainability is a general principle, more a vision than a concrete goal, due to the rather vague definition that leaves the concept open to manifold interpretations. It is a normative agreement, not an enforceable and clear concept." Rather than something defined and complete, sustainability is a conceptual framework that inspires and serves as a guide (Valera and Marcos 2014) in order to discern three main elements:

1. what we *consider valuable* and how to preserve it, both now and in the long term, in order to avoid leaving *future generations* at a disadvantage due to the irreversible deterioration of vital ecosystem services that make up the *commons of humanity*;
2. how to solve dilemmas surrounding "global justice," and the conditions and criteria that make sustainability achievable;
3. what is the *responsibility* of our relationships towards ecosystems and ways of life are essential for human existence, and the deterioration of which would imply a qualitative diminishment of life in terms of biodiversity, integrity, and adaptability to change.

The concept of sustainability is related to the idea of a "better common future" for human relationships and life on earth (WCED 1987, 41), and, moreover, it "is explicitly defined as a long-term concept" (Lubk 2016, 98). As such, the concept of sustainability can be applied to more than the management of problems related

to industrialization, global population growth, or ecological deterioration. As a regulative ideal, its “guiding” character can also be extended to the area of justice as a means of dealing with dilemmas related to environmental human rights, geopolitical relations, and global agreements. In this way, “sustainability should be understood as an open-ended and positive concept that is only a provisional specification of something,” similar to the regulative functions of the concepts of liberty and justice (Michelsen *et al.* 2016, 14).

In other words, this “provisional specification” or “corrective” role of the concept of sustainability has implications that transgress the temporal frontiers of the present and the spatial boundaries traditionally associated with nation-states. It is directly related to the management and preservation of the so-called common goods of humanity, which are defined conventionally as the areas and resources that do not fall under the sovereign jurisdiction of states. These includes the oceans, the ocean floors, and the skies, as well as Antarctica, outer space, radio bandwidth (and possibly cyberspace), and ultimately, the global atmosphere itself.

Reconstructing the concept of sustainability as a regulative notion, leads one to reflect on the *ethos of responsibility* (Jonas 1984), with particular regard to the concept of the intrinsic value of different forms of life: “Do any environmental entities (species, ecosystems, or organisms) possess intrinsic value?” (Sandler 2012). Pondering this question entails reconsidering our position in relation to other living beings and recognizing the richness and complexity of life that is connected to its vulnerability and capacity for resistance. From this perspective, sustainability appears to be a dynamic concept that might still serve as a guide to the global community with regard to the uncertainties of planetary environmental change. In following Becker (2012, 135): “The modern concept of sustainability is an important and fruitful concept and has the potential to orient the individual, societies, global community, and academic research in their development and improvement. To fully realize this potential requires both theoretical and practical steps. Theoretically, it requires the proper understanding of the meaning of sustainability and the characteristics of sustainability issues, and the development of adequate approaches for their analysis.”

FROM SCIENCE TO ETHICS

Although the concept of sustainability is heavily related to scientific practice, it is not exclusive to the field of science. Rather, as highlighted by Michelsen *et al.* (2016, 13), it is “an ethically grounded concept,” or a concept built on “ethical norms” (Michelsen *et al.* 2016, 13). In this way, it seems that “sustainability [...] does not describe a scientifically observed fact” (Michelsen *et al.* 2016, 14), but rather it refers to “how the world would have to be” (Renn *et al.* 1999). In other words, “it is about how people would like to live today and tomorrow, as well as about what kind of future is desirable. This discourse is related to environmental ethics and the relationship between human beings and their natural and artificial world, which is largely influenced by the interests, values, and ethical attitudes of social actors” (Michelsen *et al.* 2016, 14). In this way, sustainability cannot be interpreted simply as a “*working concept*” (Valera and Bertolaso 2016, 43), as is often the case with other concepts such as biodiversity (Sarkar and Marguels 2002). On the contrary, as an evaluation of human actions, it is necessary to form a very clear connection to an ethical dimension.

It would seem perfectly fair to assume that “the term ‘sustainability’ [...] is increasingly value-based, and less descriptive” (Valera and Marcos 2014, 671; Ciegis *et al.* 2009, 28), as it is a concept that defines a certain “way of being” for the world. It was conceived as a “guiding” concept that allowed for an evaluation of the state of the world and human actions, in order to “give a direction, to guide one’s action, to distinguish between what is right and wrong, to say how one ought to act and live” (Becker 2012, 17). It is also primarily an “ethical” concept (Becker 2012, 17), dealing mainly with a capacity to guide certain activities towards concrete lines of action and solutions that are perceived as desirable or beneficial, though not yet defining “for whom” this would apply.

Some authors highlight that sustainability not only indicates a certain “desirability” regarding our behaviors, but it also provides direction towards something that is “necessary” (Mitcham 1995, 311). In following the idea expressed by Mitcham (1995), it would be logical to characterize sustainability essentially as an ethical concept, as it expresses a need or a moral duty, though

not yet going so far as to establish a legal duty¹. To put it briefly, as sustainability is a regulative idea, it follows that one consider it primarily an ethical-regulatory concept. The regulative nature of sustainability lies in the perception of “something good that must be preserved or respected” and is based on a value-driven intuition². This follows the much-needed path from science to ethics that was suggested by the German philosopher Jonas (1984): instead of leaving science out, this position proposes that it be reintegrated with a regulative purpose. It is about a responsibility not only towards future generations but one that points in three main directions: “1. The responsibility of humanity for its natural environment; 2. The responsibility of humanity for its social world; 3. The responsibility of humanity for itself” (Michelsen *et al.* 2016, 13).

These three dimensions of responsibility clearly do not coincide with what is generally considered by the literature to be “the dimensions of sustainability”: the ecological/environmental, economic, and social dimensions (Cavagnaro and Curiel 2017; Bennett *et al.* 2015). Nor is it based on the “3 P’s.” The motivation to exclude economy from the framework based on the ethics of responsibility is explained by the argument that there cannot be a responsibility *towards* the economy. This is because economy is a human activity (Petrosino 2013), and not a mere “domain” (as in the case of the natural environment, society, or humanity itself). For this reason, it is possible to exert responsibility *within* this sphere, but not *over* it. The moral imperative that characterizes sustainability, in the way that we have described, coincides with the new imperative proposed by Jonas (1984, 40): “Work in such a way that the effects of your actions be compatible with the permanence of authentic human life on Earth.” In other words: “Include in your current choices, as an object of your desire, the future integrity of man” (1984, p. 40). These Jonasian formulations pick up on and synthesize the various essential elements of sustainability (Hasna 2007): human life, natural life (as a condition for the possibility of human life), the call to develop public policies (Jonas 1984;

¹ It is important to point out that there is no consensus on the ideas of what defines sustainability as an essentially ethical concept: there are authors who highlight the futility of an association between sustainability and ethics (Mebratu 1998).

² For more on this value-based and axiological intuition, which has been developed at length by Scheler, among others, please see Hart (1971, 33-34).

Pascual *et al.* 2017), consideration of the future (including future generations), permanence, the moral relevance of our actions, authenticity, and integrity. In the next section, we will provide a critical review of some of the dimensions that are generally related to the idea of sustainability.

WHAT KIND OF ETHICS? RELATIONSHIPS AS THE FOCUS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Becker (2012, 15) states that “from a philosophical perspective one can identify three main characteristics that determine the core meaning of the modern concept of sustainability and the fundamental issues”: the sense of continuity, the sense of orientation, and fundamental relationships (Becker 2012, 10). When based on the first characteristic, sustainability refers to the continued or lasting existence of something over time, be it a system (for example, an ecosystem); a certain kind of entity or living being (for example, a species or a building); or a process (for example, an activity or development). This has been one of the main criteria that traditional science has used to define the concept of sustainability. Any given scientific approach or definition may vary based on the way in which each field or discipline defines a system, entity or process; the period of time considered; and the particular research parameters involved (Becker 2012, 10). Becker (2012, 11) observes that scientific reflections often confuse *continuance* with *orientation*, by deducing normative aspects based on continuity over time or on mechanisms of continuity: “The normative meaning of sustainability cannot be deduced directly from its meaning of continuance, and it cannot be dealt with within a traditional scientific approach.”

The first two characteristics refer to the formal elements of sustainability. To a certain degree, continuance over time and orientation reflect the normative capacity of the concept itself (Olssen 2016, 130-159). Becker highlights that the concept of sustainability also refers to the third characteristic, that is, fundamental relationships. For example, the definition offered by the *Brundtland Report* expresses two evident relationships: the relationship between human beings and their contemporaries, and the relationship between the current generation and future generations (Becker 2012, 12). In addition to these relationships, there is a

third and underlying fundamental relationship: the relationship between human beings and nature. According to Becker, this relationship can be approached directly or indirectly. Becker's analysis is interesting, as it highlights the concept of sustainability as a relational concept that involves complex interrelations (Chan *et al.* 2016). Becker (2012, 36) proposed the following definition of the term: "Sustainability is about the integrated development of our relationships with other contemporaries, future generations, and nature – i.e., about the integrated development of these three relationships." In this way, the problem of sustainability requires an analysis of three differing but interrelated dimensions: 1) moral relationships between human beings and their contemporaries; 2) moral relationships between human beings and future generations; and 3) moral relationships between human beings and nature. This analysis demonstrates that beyond each kind of relationship there is a normative idea regarding the notion of sustainability. This normative idea refers to a principle of responsibility that human beings must assume not only with our own generation but also with future generations and with the natural world in which we live (Becker 2012, 19). As human relationships, on different levels, represent the essential content of sustainability (Larson 2011), they also constitute the aspect that requires regulation. In this way, sustainability provides a regulatory focus of our own fundamental relationships (Valera 2013).

It is necessary to address three additional considerations. First, sustainability, as well as environmental ethics, is necessarily anthropogenic (Rolston III 1994, 14), though not necessarily anthropocentric. Second, the foundation of sustainability, as an anthropogenic concept focused on relationships, is a relational anthropology that highlights the reciprocal dependence of human beings on their essential relationships. As such, "sustainability addresses our ability to recognize and realize ourselves as fundamentally relational beings, as beings embedded in the threefold relationship with others, future generations, and nature. It addresses the human being as a timely, socially, and naturally contingent being and the implications of this threefold contingency for human self-identity, life, and actions" (Becker 2012, 149). And, again, "the modern concept of sustainability reminds us that we are also fundamentally related and dependent beings and that we need to take this aspect of the human existence

more seriously for future action and life” (Becker 2012, 134). And third, since fundamental human relationships represent the essential element of sustainability, and since relationships are the “emergent and dynamic properties” (Valera and Bertolaso 2016, 45-46) between different entities, sustainability requires a *bottom-up* methodological focus that is capable of adapting to the uniqueness of these properties (Salazar 2018). A mere *top-down* methodological approach is simply inadequate, and it is likely that it is for this reason that many methodological approaches to sustainability have failed. Such approaches (both bottom-up and top-down) focus on identifying elements that are essential to the concept itself, in order to develop indicators that measure a certain human impact.

CONCLUSIONS. FROM SCIENCE TO ETHICS, FROM ETHICS TO EDUCATION

It can be asserted that the concept of sustainability is formally a regulative concept that concerns our essential relationships. For this reason, it necessarily involves issues that are fundamentally ethical. Despite clarifying these two points, our initial question remains partially unanswered: where did the gap between the *theory* and the *praxis* of the concept of sustainability originate? A solid approach to answering this question is offered by Arne Næss (2005, 127), who states that “Moralizing is too narrow, too patronizing, and too open to the question ‘Who are you? What is the relation of your preaching and your life?’” Næss implies that a moralizing and an overly demanding focus on the duties of human beings towards the environment has produced mistrust in the practice of sustainability and environmental ethics.

Insistence on our duties (towards the environment, future generations, animals, and so forth) is only one of the possible foci of environmental ethics. This is pointed out by Næss (2005, 123): “The individuals and institutions trying to influence ecologically highly relevant actions in the right direction manifest roughly three different strategies: appeal to the usefulness of ecologically positive actions, emphasis on moral obligations, and inducement to develop certain attitudes – inclinations in Kantian terminology.”

Næss himself clearly proposes a focus on environmental ethics more closely related to the “third way,” that is, a focus based on “beautiful actions” or “good actions based on inclination” (Næss 2005a, 54). Such actions respect moral duties but are not enforced as a result of obligatory moral norms. Rather, they are implemented due to individual inclination. For Næss, actions stemming from individual inclination are more far-reaching as they connect the perception of something good with a personal capacity to carry it out. In this sense, Næss states: “Acting from inclination is superior to acting from duty. [...] First, acting from duty requires conscious analysis of the situation and does not exclude acting in spite of strong disinclination. The sense of duty is generally not very strong, and because conscious analysis is required, or often required, the ways of avoiding unpleasantness through talk are considerable” (Næss 2005, 124). In following his argument further: “If it is urgent to have people behave in a certain way in a particular situation, the question ‘Are there any ways we could make them *inclined* to act (energetically and non-violently) in that way?’ has priority. There are not many noble heroes, and if people are influenced to act from inclination, a stable habit is formed, whereas the moral act, at least as it seems to be conceived by Kant, normally does not form a habit. If it forms a habit, it starts feeling natural, and an inclination occurs. In short, the moral act glides into a beautiful act. In the terminology of social science, norms are *internalized*” (Næss 2005, 124-125).

When moving from inclination to goodness (or towards something truly good), one can adopt “beautiful actions,” or good attitudes, that are founded on moral habits. It is here that general norms (sustainability as a general norm) are internalized within the individual, filling the gap that is usually created between the subject, as a particular individual, and humanity, as a general entity. Consequently, through virtue, individual action can thus reach universal levels without any internal contradiction (O’Neill 1996, 9-30; 189-212). Through such progress, the primary principle of many ecological and sustainability-based movements (“*think global; act local*”) is fulfilled through virtuous actions and is based on good inclinations, rather than on an obligation to general and abstract principles (Salazar and Baxter 2018; Salazar and Baxter 2015). If the main vein of a sustainable focus is based on virtues and good habits, rather than on principles or reports, the reason for why sustainability requires virtue-based

education becomes clear (Valera 2013; Marcos 2011, 20-22).

In this way, there is an important role for the various initiatives regarding epistemological “deconstruction” in the field of education. This is to say, initiatives that are geared towards “unlearning” the binary and objectifying paradigms that are applied to nature and have been accelerated by industrialization and the expansion of consumption during the second half of the 20th century. The current “crisis of civilization” requires various sources of thought and action beyond those conceived within modernity, which assume that technology and markets will become aligned with ecological interests and needs (Marcos 2011). This requires a different approach to the praxis of sustainability, one expressed on the basis of a socio-ecological rationality that transcends the philosophy of the objectification of nature. From this socio-ecological standpoint, that which is common is not only understood as a value in and of itself, but rather as a dynamic that emerges from social imaginaries and collective socio-spatial practices of resistance, resignification and creativity (Leff 2010). This undoubtedly follows the same critical line proposed by certain authors, such as Max Neef (1993), to question the concept of “development” as it is most commonly understood. This is to say that development, when seen as a destination, has become unattainable for many societies, including many from Latin America. Education can play a contributory role to the “deconstruction” of the predominant ecological paradigm. This is because education is aimed at critically analysing the modern conceptualization of environmentalism, as well as the neoliberal notion of sustainability and its “3 P’s” (Planet, People, Profit). It is only through such a critical analysis that it is feasible to make progress towards constructing a notion of sustainability that is unchained from the obvious limitations and/or distortions caused by “unsustainable” paradigms.

For these reasons, we think it is important to provide a practical education in virtues. A practical education in virtues that includes austerity, compassion, humility, courage, temperance, prudence, self-control, and the capacity for admiration, takes us away from simple greed, whim, hooliganism, and consumerism, and ultimately helps us to preserve nature. In the words of Attfield (2018, 103): “A more promising approach is that of virtue ethics.”

Therefore, environmental education would be more useful if it moved away

from teaching catastrophism, from the denigration of everything human, and from inducing guilt in people from as early as their childhoods. In return, it could emphasize the most positive and enriching aspects of our relationship with nature and the infinite possibilities that we have to improve nature by making it more habitable (Valera 2019). Following Næss, we have the impression that environmental education is failing due to excessive “ethicism” and does not demonstrate the joy, the playfulness, or the human capacity to improve nature and to enjoy it. From that enjoyment of nature, love and care can arise – not from the puritanism of guilt and duty and not from the domination and the ideologization that generates instinctive rejection in young people. The best formula for environmental education would include metaphysical, anthropological, and scientific knowledge bases; direct contact with nature; a practical education on virtues; and respect for the freedom of people.

If education can contribute to disseminating the experience of “epistemological deconstruction,” it must also contribute to the emerging conceptualization of sustainability. This concept must eventually become commonplace within various educational settings, reflect a regulative orientation and meaning in terms of human relationships, and be focused on the preservation and care for what is known as the “common goods of humanity” (Salazar and Cerna 2020).

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