

## What Could Ethics and Sustainability Possibly Have In Common?

At first glance it is tempting to think that ethics and sustainability are unrelated. Ethics is a three-thousand-year-old inquiry into the nature of the good life and the good society, born of political theory and philosophy. Sustainability is a relatively modern concept originally concerned with environmental stewardship, born of ecology and the environmental movement.

More recently, however, sustainability has expanded into a concern for social and economic justice as essential factors in a stable and vital web of life. In this context, ethicists need to expand their understanding of *the good life* to include care for all species and the systems the support life.

As these two concepts mature and expand, it becomes increasingly clear that sustainability flows from ethics and the moral life like a river in springtime. There are several major connections between the fields of ethics and sustainability, and they can be summarized by the following three words or phrases: relationships; choices; and the common good. But before we look at those connections, let's take a closer look at ethics.

### A Closer Look at Ethics

In order to understand ethics, it is first helpful to distinguish between *ethics* and *the moral life*.

Philosophers over the years have disagreed about many of the nuances of the moral life. But most of them agree that preventing harm and offering mutual aid are the central obligations of the moral person and society.

The first obligation, to prevent harm, makes sense even in the most universal context. Since most people want to avoid harm in all of its forms (physical, psychological, social, economic, etc.), it makes sense that a moral society would ask everyone to prevent harm to anyone else.

However, should harm occur by our hand or someone else's, the second obligation – offer mutual aid – must be embraced. In a moral context, we are responsible for offering aid even if we did not do the harm.

The word “ethics” refers to several things. On one level, ethics is a field of academic study like geography or physics. In a more specific sense, ethics is a sort of guidebook that helps us make tough choices.

As a tool, ethics provides practical help for people who want to prevent harm and offer aid in the moral realm. These tools come in various forms, such as decision-making models, professional standards, handbooks, hotlines or support from a corporate ethics officer. Just as carpenters have tools to make their work easier, ethics provides tools that make it easier to meet our moral obligations.

However, in the final analysis, ethics is about behavior. If we really want to know what our ethics are, we can look in two places. The first is our calendar. Whether paper or electronic, our calendars record how we spend our time — a precious resource. We might talk a lot about valuing family, friends, church and exercise. But a quick glance at our calendar will reveal whether or not we really do.

The other document to look at is our checkbook and/or credit card statement. Here is a record of how we spend our money. Again, I might say that my central values are education, justice for the poor and fun with family. But my financial records might tell a different tale. In a free democratic society and a market economy, how I spend my time and money are the most powerful indicators of my actual ethics.

Look at how you spend your time and money — not to conjure guilt, but to instill awareness. If we review our behavior and don't like what we see, then we are invited by integrity to change that behavior.

With this very basic understanding of the moral and ethical life, the question remains; how does the concept of sustainability connect?

I believe we can find powerful connection by exploring three concepts that are at the core of ethics and sustainability: right relationships; right choices; and the common good.

### **Three Common Concepts**

#### **Right Relationships**

How we treat others is the essence of the moral life and ethics. Furthermore, ethics helps us to see that we do not live as islands, but as Martin Luther King, Jr. said. “In an inescapable network of mutuality.” We are, like it or not, each other's keepers.

Sustainability, with its roots in ecological principles, recognizes that we live within systems of networks and relationships. Whether we dismiss this truth by ignorance or arrogance, nature has a way of reminding us of the truth of our interconnectedness. If we produce too much trash, our landfills become unmanageable. If we mindlessly put toxins in the land and water, then we also unknowingly ingest them at another point in the food chain, and cancer rates increase.

Ethics and sustainability both advocate right relationship — not only for the sake of the “other,” but for our sakes as well. It is both wise and a wise investment in self-interest to lead ethical and sustainable lives.

Ethics helps us to understand that we insure peace as we work for global justice and —conversely — we add to our insecurity when we tolerate global injustice in any form. When we compassionately seek to meet the basic needs of others on the planet, we invest in our collective quality of life.

Likewise, sustainability invites us to make wise and, at times, sacrificial investments in nature and natural systems so that we can be the beneficiaries of the Earth's life-giving blessings over the long haul.

In ethics and sustainability, we can engage with others in relationships that use and abuse, or relationships that honor and restore. When we invest in honorable and restorative relationships, we become the beneficiary. Sustainability and ethics understand the symbiotic nature of our lives. Within the web of life, what affects one affects all; what diminishes one diminishes all. Finally, an investment in the greater good is always an investment in our own lives and the lives of those we love. Both ethics and sustainability assert that quality of life can be measured by the quality of our relationships.

## Right Choices

In order to insure right relationships, we need to invest in right choices. As an extreme example for the sake of comparison, our choices for relationships can be either short term, foolish and unenlightened; or long term, wise and compassionate.

Imagine you were about to hire a financial planner to manage your money. Which of the characteristics listed above would you like your financial manager to have?

For some reason, we understand the importance of the characteristics of right choice-making when it comes to our money. Yet we appear not to embrace them when it comes to our soil and water, or the plight of our global sisters and brothers.

In ethics, we believe that choices lead to behaviors, and behaviors lead to the development of habits. Some of our choices honor those relationships with which our lives intersect. Other choices — by deliberate intent or unintentional meandering — hurt others. That, in a nutshell, is the distinction between ethical and unethical behavior.

Sustainability also focuses on choices. Some are routine; they fall into our normal patterns and we don't realize that they spoil the earth, inflict suffering and perpetuate injustice. Sustainability, like ethics invites several habits in our choice-making: to be aware of the harmful implications of everyday choices; to seek non-violent alternatives; and to let our choices inspire new life-giving behaviors.

Ethics and sustainability ask us to re-examine the daily choices that have become our habits, then ask ourselves, "Are they wise, enlightened and bound to bring us happiness over the long haul?"

If we discover that our choices, behaviors and habits are not just or life-giving, ethics and sustainability invite us to change our behavior.

Most of us don't like change. So how do we begin to make new choices, let alone create new life-giving habits? The answer is to start today with the one life-giving question we can ask ourselves: "What now?"

"What now?" recognizes that global warming is happening, and that we have treated our global neighbors cold-heartedly. "What now" recognizes that we have created too many toxic wastes sites and that we have too many poisoned relations with neighboring nations.

"What now?" is not afraid of reality, and it causes us to lean into the rest of today with hope. So we ask ourselves, "What one step could I take today?" Then ethics leans in and nudges us, so we change our question to, "What one step *will* I make today?"

My brother was in the midst of a research project on exercise. During his research I asked him, "Which is the best exercise to keep me in good health?" He answered, "The one you'll do." When we begin with 'the one we will do,' we move past rhetoric and into action. Through practice, the one step we take today will be the beginning of new life-giving habits and choices.

## The Common Good

"Common" is the combination of two Latin words *cum* and *munis*. *Cum* means "together" and *munis* means, "ready to serve." Therefore what we hold in common is that which, together, we are ready to serve.

We can have common goals, agendas, and intentions, but none of them might be intended for the “good.” What happens when we combine that which is common and that which is good?

For Aristotle the “good” was the ultimate end towards which individuals and society should strive. Therefore, the remaining question is, “Toward what ultimate and noble ends are we willing to serve together?”

The common good is not as much a tangible economic equation as it is a moral commitment. We have all been in a place where the quality of love was palpable. Love seemed to fill the air, and was a contagion that proliferated itself to all that entered into its presence. The common good comes to life in the same fashion.

It is our concern for all life that animates the common good. When one person, or a small group, decides to live life with an *other-oriented* focus, the common good is advanced. It begins as a trickle; one act, one decision starts the flow of goodness into a community or organization. If the trickle that began in inspiration continues in determination, large measures of impact are possible. In the same way the water of a brook can smooth the rough edges of rocks, so too our trickles of moral concern transform the jagged places in our organizations and communities into gracious spaces, where the best of the human person can emerge.

As these acts of generosity persist over time, they contribute to a culture of kindness. There will be times when the agents of goodness will feel taken advantage of by those still addicted to self, but goodness often begets goodness. As others see that it is safe to set aside the armor of self-preservation, the trickle begins to widen. We can create communities where goodness cascades into our lives. We do not need to be satisfied with relationships marked by suspicion and fear that cause us to live in the deserts of greed and isolation. We can send forth streams of living waters that will transform our dry lands into gardens of generosity and compassion.

The common good is a phrase that reminds us that we live our lives within a household, and it asks us to be good roommates. We all have self-interest; ethics and sustainability are not commitments that would deny us our human nature. Both commitments do, however, seek to elevate our nature to the noble and good by inspiring us to be other-oriented. The common good asks that as we proceed through our life choices in the midst of relationships, we keep a special eye out for the least fortunate and the most vulnerable in our midst.

When we choose to be sensitive to the reality of global hunger and see the relationship between hunger, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization’s policies on one hand, and the availability of fresh grapes every day in our produce aisles on the other, we have a chance to respond on behalf of the common good.

Further, when we begin to see that hunger and desperate poverty in South America cause the poor to make desperate choices — choices that deplete the rainforest, eliminate species and change the global climate — we recognize not only the interconnectedness of our lives, but that ethics and sustainability are linked together in our pursuit of the promise and hope associated with the common good.

## Summary

Together, ethics and sustainability create an ethic of life. In the Hebrew scriptures, as the Mosaic law is offered to the people of Israel, the prophet — speaking on behalf of God — says: “See, I have set before you life and death; choose life that you and your descendants may live.”

Today, the same choice exists. Some of the choices before us are death-dealing, others are life-giving. When we allow three-fifths of the world to go to bed hungry every night, observe the elimination of species and do nothing, or witness the latest holocaust in Darfur without calling our representatives, we choose death.

However, whenever we pick up a piece of litter, ride our bike instead of driving our car, respond to pain and injustice in the human or natural world by writing a letter, go to a meeting, make a donation or write a pieces of legislation, we choose life.

When we make one or all of these life-giving choices, we advance ethics and sustainability because we choose life.

The choice is ours.