

The Morality of Sustainability: *A DIY Exploration*

By Jeff Huggins

Is it morally important to achieve sustainability? Should we try our best to do so? *Why? How do we know?*

Would it be incommensurate with the very point, warp, and woof of morality to knowingly continue on an unsustainable path? That is, would doing so be immoral?

We humans often learn best by considering things ourselves. We don't like being told: We like *finding!* So, I offer some exercises, questions, and quotes for your exploration. Try to consider each one to its core. After each, ask yourself, "What did I find?" Ask, "What are the implications for the larger picture?"

Begin with a clear mind. And remember the aim: to explore the relationship between morality and sustainability.

1. Imagine a spaceship with thirty women and men aboard, lost in space, with no Earth or other home left. The inhabitants constitute the only human community. Imagine that the spaceship contains a sufficient—but not unlimited—quantity of life's necessities, e.g., air, water, soil, a source of energy (e.g., access to sunlight), and other life. What do you learn? What does this situation suggest about morality and its relationship to sustainability?
2. What is the most foundational function of the human hand? Put another way, what is the hand's "reason for being"? To understand what I'm getting at, you might need to ask someone familiar with the basic role of "adaptations".
3. Consider Dylan Thomas's great poem, "The Hand That Signed the Paper". The last line is, "Hands have no tears to flow." What does this poem help us see?

4. Add to the picture this observation from Charles Darwin's "Descent of Man": "The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man."
5. Consider the question that Shakespeare's Hamlet put so well: "To be, or not to be, that is the question." I'd also suggest reading Albert Camus' acknowledgment of this question's fundamental importance contained in the opening paragraph of his book, "The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays", under the heading "Absurdity and Suicide". Consider that this question can be posed at the human-species level as well as at the individual-person level.
6. Now imagine yourself as someone else—e.g., in her shoes. Imagine trading places. Go deep, and be as real as you can. What does this tell you about morality? While you're at it, reflect on Daniel Goleman's point in the last sentence of his book, "Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships": "The social brain's wiring connects us all at our common human core."
7. Watch the movie "Children of Men". *Really*. It's important.
8. Now consider whether we humans should count on, or expect, "justification" for our own existence to come from an authority other than a sound combination of our own "reasoning" and evidence available to us. Should we humans expect an authority independent from ourselves to "justify" our own existence *to* us and *for* us, or to give us answers and make choices for us? I pose this question with the present aim in mind (i.e., to understand the morality-sustainability relationship) and with the realization that a diversity of people face the sustainability problem together.

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9. Consider that if we can't count on justification for ourselves to come from an authority other than our own human reasoning and evidence, we inevitably must address the question of whether we "ought" to exist, that is, whether we will justify our own existence. I call this the *self-question* or, on a species level, the *life-question*. This is, in essence, Hamlet's and Camus' question, but considered at the *species* level. There are only three ways, in essence, to respond to it:
 - a. With a life-affirming answer;
 - b. With a life-negating answer (i.e., in a self-defeating way);
 - c. With denial and avoidance, or persistent hesitation.
10. In relation to this *life-question*, consider the wisdom in these lyrics from an Isley Brothers' song: "It's your thing. Do what ya wanna do. I can't tell ya, who to sock it to."
11. Now consider: Why do people say that it doesn't make sense to "bite the hand that feeds you", especially if that "hand" is reasonable and basically responds to your own actions? And what do we mean by saying, "he pulled the rug out from under me"?
12. Add to these considerations our human awareness of time, of our interrelationships with the environment and with the community of life, and of the dynamics of cause-and-effect. How do these human abilities add to the picture? What *responsibilities* do they carry with them?
13. Consider this, from the Dalai Lama's book, "Ethics For The New Millennium": "And because, as we have seen, our interests are inextricably linked, we are compelled to accept ethics as the indispensable interface between my desire to be happy and yours."
14. Consider this comment from Bertrand Russell: "Some people would rather die than think; and many do."

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15. Now examine the parallelism between the following two statements:

- Character is destiny. (Heraclitus)
- Morality is most foundationally “about” the sustainable survival of the human species (accomplished in a way that also satisfies other important considerations, of course, including our interdependent interrelationship with the biological community).

Finally, ask yourself, “What do my findings, taken together, tell me about the interrelationships between sustainability and morality — *and about morality itself?*”

Below, I list some quotes that shed clarifying light on the matter, from sources including Einstein, Jefferson, Aldo Leopold, a Native American constitution, a major global corporation, Bob Dylan, and others.

I hope this DIY Exploration has been helpful. Thanks very much for your consideration!

Be Well.

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Some Illustrative Quotes

Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation.

- The Constitution of the Iroquois Nations

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

- Aldo Leopold

Some people would rather die than think; and many do.

- Bertrand Russell

It is obvious that the real wealth of life aboard our planet is a forwardly-operative, metabolic, and intellectual regenerating system. Quite clearly we have vast amounts of income wealth as Sun radiation and Moon gravity to implement our forward success. Wherefore living only on our energy savings by burning up the fossil fuels which took billions of years to impound from the Sun or living on our capital by burning up our Earth's atoms is lethally ignorant and also utterly irresponsible to our coming generations and their forward days. Our children and their children and our future days. If we do not comprehend and realize our potential ability to support all life forever we are cosmicly bankrupt.

- R. Buckminster Fuller, Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth (1969)

We are firmly convinced, and we act on that conviction, that with nations, as with individuals, our interests soundly calculated will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties.

- Thomas Jefferson

You cannot be considered an ethical company if you do not follow sustainability principles. Nor can you apply sustainability concepts if you do not have a strong foundation of ethical principles. The two are intrinsically intertwined ...

- Perry Minnis, Global Director, Ethics & Compliance, Alcoa

The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.

- Albert Einstein

A pine cut down, a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man. Can he who has discovered only some of the values of whalebone and whale oil be said to have discovered the true use of the whale? Can he who slays the elephant for his ivory be said to have "seen the elephant"? These are petty and accidental uses; just as if a stronger race were to kill us in order to make buttons and flageolets of our bones; for everything may serve a lower as well as a higher use. Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it.

- Henry David Thoreau, Chesuncook

Today we begin in earnest the work of making sure that the world we leave our children is just a little bit better than the one we inhabit today.

- Barack Obama; the headline quote on the site change.gov on November 30 last year

In keeping with our commitment to environmental justice and education, we invite all our guests to reflect on their need to reverence and preserve the earth and their responsibility to work toward a just and sustainable future for all creation. Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.

- Presentation Center, Los Gatos, California

- K'ung fu-zi (Confucius), from the Analects . . .

Confucius fished with a pole, and did not use a net; when he hunted, he did not shoot roosting birds. (7:26/27)

Confucius said, "The virtue of balanced normalcy is consummate, it seems, but it has been scarce among the people for a long time." (6:29)

Confucius said, "Ideal people are universal and not clannish. Small-minded people are clannish and not universal." (2:14)

Confucius said, "Exemplary people understand matters of justice; small people understand matters of profit." (1:16)

Confucius said, "People who do not think far enough ahead inevitably have worries near at hand." (15:12)

Confucius said, "Not to mend one's ways when one has erred is to err indeed." (15:30)

We have chosen them [these initiatives] both because we think solving them will make a better, fairer, safer world for our children and grandchildren — and the children and grandchildren of people all over the world — but also because we feel that these core initiatives fit well with Google's core strengths . . .

- Google's Dr. Larry Brilliant

For Enel, Corporate Social Responsibility is synonymous with sustainability and the ability to maintain its three variables in balance: economic responsibility, environmental responsibility and social responsibility.

- The website of Enel SpA, a major European utility and proponent of renewable energy

Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.

- Francis Bacon

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

- Albert Einstein

- Socrates, from *The Republic* (Plato) . . .

Socrates: For though the society we have described seems to me to be the true one, like a man in health, there's nothing to prevent us, if you wish, studying one in a fever. Such a society will not be satisfied with the standard of living we have described. It will want couches and tables and other furniture, and a variety of delicacies, scents, perfumes, call-girls and confectionary. And we must no longer confine ourselves to the bare necessities of our earlier description, houses, clothing, and shoes, but must add the fine arts of painting and embroidery, and introduce materials like gold and ivory. . . .

Socrates: We shall have to enlarge our state again. Our healthy state is no longer big enough; its size must be enlarged to make room for a multitude of occupations none of which is concerned with necessities. . . .

Socrates: And the territory which was formerly enough to support us will now be too small.

Socrates: If we are to have enough for pasture and plough, we shall have to cut a slice off our neighbours' territory. And if they too are no longer confining themselves to necessities and have embarked on the pursuit of unlimited material possessions, they will want a slice of ours too. . . . And that will lead to war, Glaucon, will it not?

Glaucon: It will.

In the wilds we comprehend that in the big picture and over the long run security does not come from controlling and exploiting nature. The fundamental revelation of this first century of ecological science is that human well-being is inextricably linked to the health, diversity, and normal functioning of the global ecosystem.

- Roderick Frazier Nash, *Why Wilderness?*, from the "Plateau Journal"

In the present circumstances, no one can afford to assume that someone else will solve their problems. Every individual has a responsibility to help guide our global family in the right direction. Good wishes are not sufficient; we must become actively engaged.

- The Dalai Lama

So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.

- Bob Dylan, All Along The Watchtower