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# How Sustainable is the Idea of Sustainability?

Having gone through a forestry education back in the 1970s, and being a skeptic by nature when it comes to buzzwords—and surely "sustainability" has been a buzzword for well over a decade now—I admit that my initial response to this question was: "Not very, if at all." Yet, because I am a skeptic, in the old sense of the word, and doubt even the sustainability of my own opinions, I thought I had better investigate the matter a little more thoroughly. "The truest state of mind," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "rested in, becomes false" (38). Not long after penning these words in his journal, Emerson resigned his ministry. Taking a less dramatic course to pursue my convictions, I devoted considerable time to reading widely in the scientific literature in order to familiarize myself more precisely with the term "sustainability" and its moral implications.

In the early nineties, the Ecological Society of America (ESA) offered a definition that seems to capture the general sense of the term as employed in a wide variety of contexts. ESA defined sustainability as "management practices that will not degrade the exploited [eco]system or any adjacent systems," and furthermore, in order to achieve this goal, "consumption standards" must be recognized "that are within the bounds of ecological possibility and to which all can aspire" (Meyer and Helfman 569). That's pretty vague language. For the time being, I'll defer speculating on what might fall outside the "bounds of ecological possibility," save to suggest that, at least to some minds, hints are to be gleaned here of what used to be called the super-natural. Some years prior to the ESA definition, the World Commission on Environment and Development took a crack at defining "sustainable development." They determined it to be that which "meets

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the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (43). Once again, we are confronted with vague or what I prefer to call "suggestive" language. Given the broad currency of the term, it's not surprising to run into equivocation, but if you had to sum up the gist of the World Commission's view, you could say that "sustainable development" is akin to the lesson most people learn when quite young around the kitchen table: *Mind your manners and don't be greedy.*

Early on it was recognized that the notion of sustainability was fraught with problems, looseness of definition being the least of them. In 1993, the journal *Ecological Applications* published a forum titled "Perspectives on Sustainability," in which several leading ecologists debated the merits of this still fledgling idea. At the center of hot debate was an article by Donald Ludwig, Ray Hilborn, and Carl Waters, which succinctly pointed out that the souped-up bandwagon of sustainability, having just pulled into the fast lane thanks to the Rio accord and perhaps Al Gore, was speeding along with its emergency brake on. What drew fire from their fellow ecologists was the claim that human beings just don't know enough about those ecosystems they are so eager to manage, and given ecologists' inability to predict with certainty the outcomes of any given management practice implemented upon even the least complex of natural systems, it becomes "more appropriate," say Ludwig and company, "to think of resources as managing humans than the converse" (547). The authors go so far as to suggest that "human motivations and responses" be included "as part of the system to be studied and managed" (548). Sounds good to me, but I already have a propensity for the aesthetic and indeed the poetic, which is why I did not fare so well in forestry school.

Ludwig and company don't say it in so many words, but they imply that it is incumbent upon scientists and managers, when compiling taxonomies and generating data sets for environmental decision-making, to take into account the full expanse of the human mind, with all its curious flora and fauna—what a psychologist might call its neuroses and what I am perfectly comfortable to call its demons. Needless to say, those who insist on a strict division between the "human" and the "environment"—in other words, a clear separation between "subject" and "object," which is the very foundation of the scientific method—will blanch at fuzzy talk such as this. Indeed, many of the forum participants did. And though most were discomfited at the prospect of the weedy human psyche being introduced to the pristine management environment, they did concur that the idea of sustainability was vague and elusive. Writes one of them: "Sustainable development is a moving target. It has multiple dimensions, scientific, economic, and political, many of which are not amenable to scientific illumination" (Salwasser 588). Another admits to "an inherent unknowability and unpredictability to sustainable development" (Holling 554). I for one am at ease with all this—I like a little surprise and even some mystery in my world.



Although consensus emerged among these scientists that the notion of sustainability is riddled with uncertainty and very difficult to pin down, none of them addressed what seems to me, admittedly an outsider to their disciplines, an obvious flaw in reasoning: in its privileging of *duration* or *permanence* as a value, sustainability runs counter to a fundamental principle in nature, framed most succinctly by the sixth-century BCE philosopher Heraclitus in his famous "river fragments," and recapitulated by Plato in the *Cratylus* as, *panta rhei*, "all things flow" or "everything is in flux." At about the same time as Heraclitus, the Buddha was presenting his followers with the doctrine of *samsara*—roughly translated as "the constantly moving." His dying words were, "All compound things are subject to decay. Monks, strive diligently!" The classical Japanese poets, working with the same insight, were fond of referring to the never-resting realm of reality as "the floating world." That nothing stays the same is the very basis of history itself, and by extension, evolutionary theory. Much as we may like a particular spot on the earth "just the way it is"—say, an old growth redwood forest or an undammed river in the Pacific Northwest leaping with salmon—such "things" have not always been as they are now; nor would they remain in the desired condition, even if human beings weren't around to mess them up. "What does not change," says Heraclitus in the venerable translation of Charles Olson, "is the will to change" (5). Considered in this light, there is no ecological justification for the idea of sustainability.

Another significant problem with the notion at hand is the question of intergenerational responsibility or equity, which has been called "the backbone of sustainability" (Meyer and Helfman 569). This doctrine—and it does seem to be a doctrine—requires that we conserve the environment, which includes its biodiversity as well as its material resources such as petroleum and the very atmosphere of the planet—for the sake of future human generations. Although the idea of providing a legacy for those who follow is nothing new, it takes on a greater urgency and indeed authority when couched in the language of ecology. The economist Herman Daly, for instance, lays out the conditions for what he envisions as a sustainable society: the use of renewable resources should not exceed their rates of regeneration; the use of nonrenewable resources should be exploited only at a rate that does not exceed the creation of renewable substitutes; and waste emis-

sions must not exceed the "renewable assimilative capacity of the environment" (256). Once again, it's "Mind your manners and don't be greedy," which is all well and good, but the twist here is that the ethic is now extended—or should we say "projected"—into an indeterminate future.

Begged is the question, *How do we know with any certainty what future generations will be like and what they will need to sustain themselves?* What sort of mathematical modeling, or better yet, mode of divination, should be employed by economists and other planners to obtain a satisfactory response to this question? Don't overlook the fact that most people, when asked to imagine the future, simply describe their present situation, except with all the negative aspects removed. Deducing conclusions about what ought to be from premises rooted only in what was or is the case has been labeled by many logicians as "the naturalistic fallacy." In other words, just because things are this way now, and have always been this way in the past (so far as we know), there is no justification for concluding that the same conditions will hold tomorrow. The universe is full of surprises; anything can happen. Argument from experience, as David Hume pointed out in the eighteenth century, is without rational foundation. Although it's perfectly "natural" for human beings to argue this way, such arguments are in no way logically rigorous. Thus sustainability—with its "backbone" of intergenerational equity—is revealed to be a dogma, a faith, rather than a scientific perspective. Nothing wrong with that, save that science-minded proponents of sustainability seldom acknowledge this doctrinal status.

Despite these difficulties, the notion of intergenerational equity does bring us to a genuine philosophical question, pertaining to ethics: How does one distinguish between right and wrong action? Phrasing it this way points us toward what I consider the most viable idea behind all this talk of sustainability. It's one of the oldest of philosophical questions, and by framing it in terms of human behavior toward what we now call the "environment," it becomes a vital question. As such, it is inextricably linked to a host of other vital questions, including, What constitutes right conduct? What constitutes right speech? Right livelihood? Or to sum it up in more familiar terms: "How do I live a good life?" Good in the moral sense.

The ancient Greek philosophers pursued such questions under the general heading of *eudaimonia*. It is a topic that admittedly has been overworked by philosophers for two and a half millennia. "*Eudaimonia*," says my friend Max Oelschlaeger, "is one of the most constipated ideas in history" (e-mail). For my part, I like to think of *eudaimonia* as the intellectual equivalent of an "attractive nuisance,"



which is a legal term referring to a potentially harmful object that stands on somebody's property—say, an old mine adit or an abandoned building—an object so inviting or interesting that it lures the child onto the property to investigate. Sometimes in the course of exploration, the audacious child gets into trouble, suffers an injury or worse. Then the property owner is held liable. Now, in terms of the law, attractive nuisance is construed entirely from the adult perspective of property ownership and liability, but from a child's perspective—which begins in a sense of wonder—the attractive nuisance is a glorious object, a gateway to adventure: the mine adit leads to a buried treasure and the abandoned building is teeming with ghosts. Because I'm not a philosopher, I have no worries about the professional liability that goes with poking around in places I don't belong.

The word *eudaimonia* has presented a notorious challenge to translators. As the central concept of ancient Greek ethics, it signifies the supreme human good, the proper direction of all our activities; in short, it's what makes life complete and worth the while. Most often it has been rendered into English by the word "happiness." Recently I was talking with a philosopher who described his specialty as "Happiness Studies," which suggested a new and refreshingly jolly perspective coming from philosophy departments, until the man read the bewilderment (or was it envy?) on my face, and quickly added: "You know, ethics. Aristotle and all that." So, when using the word "happiness" to translate *eudaimonia*, one must be careful to distinguish between the ancient Greek sense of an objectively desirable life, and our contemporary concept of happiness as a subjectively felt attitude. For the Greeks, *eudaimonia* originally was something bestowed and sustained by the gods—you can gather this from the etymology, the word literally means "good spirit." In later classical and Hellenistic philosophy, *eudaimonia* became something cultivated and perfected by the individual—and in this sense was conflated with notions of character—yet it maintained an objective quality. It was something outside the pale of what we now refer to as the "self." For ourselves, however, in contrast to the Greek philosophers, happiness has become almost entirely subjective: it's how we feel about our life and more importantly about our *self*.

Another stumbling block to grasping the philosophical import of *eudaimonia*, both in ancient times as well as today, is that popular usage of the term (and likewise the word "happiness") always had strong connotations of material prosperity. Thus the *eudaimon*, or "fortunate person," was generally understood as one who enjoys great wealth. While material wealth was regarded by some ancient philosophers as a sign of *eudaimonia*, most acknowledged it was hardly sufficient for

it, and for some thinkers it was altogether irrelevant. Democritus, for instance, cautions that, "*Eudaimonia* does not dwell in flocks of cattle or in gold" (Freeman 107). Alas, admonitions from philosophers seldom prevent confusion in the popular understanding, so the term was as equivocal to the average Greek as "sustainability" is for us.

Nevertheless, despite this kinship in confusion—or perhaps because of it—I propose that this old Greek idea of *eudaimonia*, if we poke at it a bit, might still have some life in it and be able to yield insight on the matter of sustainability. But in order to do so, we need to get around the formidable Aristotle, who of all the ancients had the most to say on the subject and was so compelling in his treatment of it that the majority of philosophers since inevitably suffer from an Aristotelian bias. According to his *Nicomachean Ethics*, all men agree that the aim of life, the highest human good, is *eudaimonia*, but men disagree as to what it consists in (1730-31). The critical move distinguishing Aristotle on this subject from previous philosophers—most notably Plato—is his downplaying of the notion of divine favor while at the same time individualizing *eudaimonia*. He insists that external factors—i.e., one's environment—exercise a more profound influence on one's ability to achieve perfection. When it comes to the good life, says Aristotle, to each his own; nurture triumphs over nature.

Prior to this shift, *eudaimonia* was conceived in universalist terms, more along the lines of Plato's Ideal Forms, or to make a modern analogy, something like Carl Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious. This is an important distinction, because *eudaimonia*—formerly thought to be radically other to the individual subject—has now been set up by Aristotle for acquisition by that very subject. Rather than something that possesses us, *eudaimonia* becomes something we possess.

This shift in consciousness is evident in the ways we commonly talk. For instance, it used to be said when speaking of dreams, "A dream came to me," indicating its essential otherness. Nowadays we say, "I had a dream," as if we ourselves—or our "unconscious," which we also speak of as if it were a possession—authored it. Similar to this is the use of the word genius, which is the Latin translation of the Greek word *daimon*, the root of *eudaimonia*. In former times, you spoke of *having* a genius, as you would speak of having a friend; nowadays you *are* a genius, and perhaps all the lonelier as a result, for as Democritus observed, "The soul is the dwelling-place of the *eudaimon*," which is to say the "good spirit" (Freeman 107). Having evicted that good spirit—otherwise known as the guardian angel—the modern person now has a big unoccupied house for a soul. But not to worry, it's crammed to the ceiling with possessions.



According to the oldest sense of *eudaimonia*, human beings live the best possible life only when they sustain a proper relationship with the non-human realm of the daimonic, or what many today would simply call the divine, though I myself would be perfectly content in calling it "Nature." In any case, because one's genius or guardian spirit was regarded as a personal attendant throughout the course of life, the Romans thought it worthy of veneration; one was expected to offer yearly sacrifices to it. Since one's birth was a particular object of the guardian spirit's care and attention, the marriage bed was familiarly known as the *genial* bed. And if one enjoyed a happy existence—happy in the sense of *eudaimon*—then he was said to have a *genial* life. Apparent in these etymological musings is a congenial insight: *eudaimonia* means that when it comes to figuring things out, we are never far from spiritual aid. There's a vast unseen community out there, just waiting for our renewed attention.

Don't worry, living the good or sustainable life does not demand we fling open the doors to demonology. Nor does it require, or even tolerate, a literal-minded religious fundamentalism. It's much simpler and safer than any of that. All we need do is recover the image of what James Hillman calls "the lost face of the world." In his book *The Force of Character*, Hillman writes:

> The lost face of the world is not mentioned by environmentalists. Like their opponents, the harvesters, exploiters, and developers, they read the world according to their desires. Sustainability, conservation, and restoration are noble programs, but still the human is in charge and the world is merely the arena where we implement our plans. Instead, environmentalism needs to read the lines in the face of the world, read each piece of the world for its character, to study its development and be struck to the heart by its defenselessness. (149-50)

I might quibble with Hillman over his characterization of the world as defenseless—that seems a little too anthropocentric and sentimental for my taste—but I agree with his indictment of environmentalism for having fallen too much under the sway of the reductionism and rational materialism that mark our academic, corporate, and bureaucratic culture. Having spent as much time as I have trying to bushwhack through the dry thicket of scientific literature on the subject of sustainability—so much heartless talk about matters of the heart—I am in despair. Some lines from Diane Di Prima's poem "Rant" speak to this point: "The only war that matters is the war against the imagination / All others are subsumed in it" (159).

Ah, but not to despair. Poetry, whether in verse or prose, continues to recover the lost face of our beleaguered relative, the world. You see

it, for instance, in the writings of Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, and Terry Williams, just to mention a few. And you see it in this short poem by Wendell Berry, aptly titled "A Meeting":

> In a dream I meet
> my dead friend. He has,
> I know, gone long and far,
> and yet he is the same
> for the dead are changeless.
> They grow no older.
> It is I who have changed,
> grown strange to what I was.
> Yet I, the changed one,
> ask: "How you been?"
> He grins and looks at me.
> "I been eating peaches
> off some mighty fine trees." (18)

If I may be permitted to allegorize Berry's lovely poem, let's say that the dead friend represents the lost face of the world. The speaker of the poem, still among the living, encounters the dead friend in a dream, that is, in the imagination. Neoplatonists, Gnostics, and Sufis alike all recognize the imagination as intermediary between material reality and a numinous realm. The speaker has changed, yes, grown older and indeed "strange" to his former self. His youth, along with everything else in the realm of nature, is subject to change; it cannot be sustained. And yet, paradoxically, the long lost friend, the world, has remained the same, and indeed seems to be doing quite well, despite all the changes, not the least of which is being dead. But perhaps "dead" isn't the right word. Or maybe we misunderstand the nature of death. Because it is a work of art, this poem says no more on the subject, but leaves its audience standing alert on the threshold of wonder. Already via the experience of this brief verse, I feel significantly further progress has been made toward understanding whatever it is that truly sustains us, than had I worked my way through a thousand tomes on sustainability.

Consider the proverb from ancient times, "The ability to recognize kinship is a god." Love them or hate them, we treat our kin differently, knowing that they are not far removed from ourselves. We are more alike than not. We are never isolated from each other. We share something, participate in the same coursing life. And though we may not always be able to perceive the connection, or perhaps we even resent it, it remains intact and cannot be severed. Trusting that this connection persists, we each endeavor to improve our perception, which is directly linked to how we live our lives.



The genuine insight to be gathered from the buzz about sustainability is that the world itself is our kin, yet you will have a hard time discovering it in the innumerable publications on the subject in academic journals and government documents. One might counter my criticism here by saying that scientific and bureaucratic outlets are not the venue for aesthetic, philosophical, and religious concerns such as I have been raising. My point exactly. So why then do so many of the discussants in these forums continue to voice frustration over their inability to reduce what is in fact a spiritual matter to a set of equations, or management practices, or policy directives? Sustainability, or whatever it may be that hides behind this concept, has consistently eluded the grasp of science and bureaucracy alike, because it does not dwell in those realms. As Democritus observed long ago, it dwells in the human soul—that is, in the hearts and minds of the individuals who practice science, who perform government service, who work for corporations or universities. It dwells in each of us, and never in a set of laws or rules that dictate proper attitudes and behavior.

Rational abstraction is the mortal remains of an angel, say the Kabbalists. I agree. I certainly had that sense as I read my way through the scientific literature on sustainability. An image from Homer kept coming to mind. At one point in his travels, Odysseus is required to conjure up the shades of some dead companions in order to obtain a little information. To get the ghosts to speak to him, he has to feed them sacrificial blood from the tip of his sword. Blood is the very essence of life; no wonder the ghosts are so hungry for it. The idea of sustainability—at least as it is encountered in the workaday words of science, bureaucratic agencies, and marketing firms—is as lifeless as any of the pitiable shades in the Homeric underworld. Why then do we continue to feed this particular ghost so much blood? Is it to keep it talking, in the hope that one day it might tell us how to live our lives? Do we think it will teach us a little something about ourselves? Will it sustain our love? Feed it as much as we may, when all is said and done, this ghost still withdraws into the dim and silent realms whence it came.

But life goes on.

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