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# Sustainability

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper supplies a critique of the view that a practice which ought not to be followed is *ipso facto* not sustainable, a view recently defended by Nigel Dower. It is argued that there are ethical criteria independent of the criterion of sustainability. The concept of sustainability is thus retrieved for the distinctive role and the important service in which environmental and social theorists (paradoxically including Dower) have hitherto employed it, not least when debating the nature, merits and demerits of sustainable development.

**KEYWORDS:** sustainability, arguments, development, beneficiality, justice

A widespread consensus exists both among the proponents of economic and social development and among environmentalists that development must be sustainable. Processes which undermine themselves or which for some other reason cannot be continued into the future are recognised as unlikely to contribute to the solution of problems of development or to conservation of the natural environment.<sup>1</sup> Sustainability thus seems to be a crucial quality of acceptable plans and policies for a great many future purposes.

But does the sustainability of a practice (e.g. a process of production or of development) actually imply that it passes all ethical tests and is morally beyond reproach? Desirable as sustainability may be, is it wise to give the concept of sustainability all this work to do?

One analogy suggesting an affirmative answer arises from the ascription of 'sustainable' to arguments which are sound or successful: for here 'sustainable' has a normative role, and serves to give top marks to the argument in question for rationality. So maybe 'sustainable' has a parallel normative role when ascribed to processes. Yet even with arguments, 'sustainable' is not always so used; sometimes what is conveyed is just that the argument is *capable* of being defended (or of being defended in public), not that in rational terms it succeeds. So the analogies from rational sustainability are far from unequivocal.

Nigel Dower<sup>2</sup> maintains nevertheless that a practice is sustainable only if it satisfies moral criteria, and thus is worth pursuing or ought to be pursued; otherwise it is every bit as unsustainable as it would be if sustaining it were impossible. ‘Sustainable’ thus actually has a similar logic to ‘desirable’; indeed Dower cites G.E. Moore’s criticism of John Stuart Mill’s use of ‘desirable’ as analogous to his own criticism of the view that ‘sustainable’ simply means ‘able to be sustained’. And there can be no doubt that this is intended as an analytic point; thus Dower writes:

What is important, analytically, is that any form of sustainable development which someone is prepared to endorse will be a form which satisfies the range of moral criteria which that person accepts, whatever those may be.<sup>3</sup>

While Dower accepts that not everyone will accept his own “evaluative positions”, perspective is added, and Dower’s view more adequately represented, through a quotation of the following passage in which these positions are embodied:

A form of development worth sustaining will at the very least not only protect the future, but also be:

- (a) just in terms of the present social structures and practices of the society;
- (b) non-damaging to the natural environment;
- (c) non-damaging to people in other countries; and
- (d) fair in relation to the like aspirations of other countries.<sup>4</sup>

We have no wish to criticise at least the last three conditions given here as criteria of desirable practices. But it should be stressed that Dower is saying that unless all these conditions (protecting the future included) are satisfied, a form of development is not sustainable because it is not worth sustaining. Our own view, by contrast, is that a practice may fail to be worth sustaining, but still be sustainable. We are not denying that sustainability is frequently a merit (for it frequently is), but rather we are pointing out that to have it is not essentially to have all the merits possible for forms of development.

It may first help to ask whether ‘sustainable’ is really logically akin to ‘desirable’. Now where sustainable arguments are sound or successful ones, they are admittedly arguments fit to be credited, and their sustainability could thus be held to put them on a par with desirable entities in respect of their being fit to be desired. But where sustainable arguments are merely ones which are defensible, they may fail to be fit to be credited; and the lack of normative import in this variety of sustainability also attaches, we maintain, to processes and practices which are sustainable. Often, of course, their very capacity for indefinite continuation itself makes sustainable processes or practices desirable; but this is far from invariably true, and thus, importantly, not a necessary truth. Nor are we aware of any other ground for regarding sustainable processes or practices as essentially fit to be sustained, let alone ones which there is a duty to sustain.

At this point a second question arises; cannot a practice be both sustainable

and either bad or indifferent (valuationally or morally)? Self-reinforcing practices (such as foot-binding probably was) may easily be bad, but perhaps their sustainability would not be granted.

Examples should therefore be selected which are widely regarded as paradigms of sustainability. Maximum Sustainable Yield is a policy applicable both to fisheries and to forestry; resources are harvested up to the point where a greater yield would undermine self-replenishment, and resources thus remain available at this level for every succeeding generation. On the other hand, such practices sometimes strike at the interests of other nonhuman species (of the ocean or of the forests), and are thus open to ethical objection. Dower would have to say that if the objection is upheld, such policies were not sustainable after all; but this seems a heroic line to take with policies of Maximum Sustainable Yield, particularly in view of their promise of continuous benefits for humanity into the indefinite future.

Those who, like ourselves, would sympathise with some of the ethical objections to such policies are much better advised, in cases where the objections are considered decisive, to characterise the policies as sustainable but unjustified, all things considered. Such a characterisation would seem no less coherent than phrases (used of other practices) such as 'courageous but foolish' (e.g. whistling in the dark) or 'longsuffering but irresolute' (e.g. quietism).

The alternative view, as has been seen, is that nothing can be regarded as both morally unjustified and sustainable. While we have already adduced what we consider to be telling arguments against this view, we should now point out that if it came to be the general view, then another concept would need to be invented for processes and practices that can be sustained, whether through human effort or through being naturally self-perpetuating. For it would be important e.g. for planners to identify practices with this characteristic, independently of whether there were overwhelming reasons for adopting them. (Sometimes, for example, there might be pairs of alternative practices with this characteristic, between which a decision could then be made on other grounds.) Our own view, however, is that no such concept needs to be invented, as the concept of sustainability already has this role.

It remains to draw some morals. First, it is mistaken to make one concept do the work of several. That way, clear and serviceable concepts like that of sustainability forego their sense. Indeed by the time that 'sustainable' is construed as meaning 'just, ecologically sound and internationally fair' as well as 'able to be sustained', it is difficult to say why the phrase to be used for the job of expressing this composite concept is 'sustainable', rather than something like 'unexceptionable' or even 'perfect in every way'.

There is a second and related point. There are multiple criteria to be applied to proposals for e.g. development, and terms are needed to allow the proposals to be checked independently against each of these criteria. Thus separate terms are needed to allow distinct judgements to be made about the beneficiality of a proposal, about its sustainability and about its justice. Terms concerning the joint

class which satisfies all these criteria at once are no substitute for ones allowing them to be considered in turn; and if this were not possible, judgements based on a plurality of criteria would scarcely be possible either.

Third, phrases such as “a just and sustainable society”, much used by Dower in the past,<sup>5</sup> are not pleonasms, as they would be if ‘sustainable’ already meant ‘just and sustainable’: as things are, they remain viable and valid phrases, the distinct conjuncts each supplementing the meaning of the other, and each contributing a meaning sufficiently distinct for its applications to be worth debating.

Fourth, the possibility of processes which are sustainable but bad should not be ruled out. (Was not slavery such?) The possibilities of unending benefits and of the continual functioning of interacting social and natural systems make (at least some) sustainable ways of life highly attractive: but sustainability is not everything, and it is important to be wary lest even sustainable processes have a fatal flaw.

Finally we should express agreement with Dower that practices which cannot be sustained as part of a sustainable worldwide system are not themselves truly sustainable. But this is not because the term ‘sustainable’ encapsulates all values. It is because sustainability can have a narrower and a broader scope, and because (in general) the broader the scope of a self-reinforcing process, the greater is the likelihood of its remaining unassailed and intact. Thus truly sustainable processes are liable to operate or be capable of operating worldwide – whether for better or for worse. This helps to explain the increasing emphasis placed by people concerned about the future of the planet on this important (but not all-important) concept.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 1987, chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> Dower 1992; see especially the section entitled “Sustainability”, at pp. 110-114.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112

<sup>5</sup> Dower 1983, pp. 91-94; also in the title of his unpublished paper “A Just and Sustainable Society”.

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