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Environmental Quality and the Quality of our Way of Life

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ABSTRACT: Today, sustainable development is generally accepted as a guiding principle. The present relation societies have with the natural environment is considered as being not-sustainable. However this presupposes some idea about the quality of the environment and of activities affecting the environment and, as a consequence, of the quality of life. In this article I defend the proposition that the limited progress made with respect to the environment – despite all the good intentions – could be due to a potential conflict between ‘quality’ and sustainable development. In other words: our interpretation of the concept of ‘quality’ is not compatible with the aims of sustainability. Some consequences for research and policy of accepting this proposition are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Quality, sustainable development, lifestyle

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development appears to be the answer to the present environmental crisis, both on an international level (e.g. WCED and UN) and on a national level (e.g. the Dutch government in their Environmental Policy Plan). This opinion gains acceptability since there is much that is unsustainable in the way we treat the environment at present. The proposition that ‘we cannot go on like this’ meets little opposition as the apotheosis to a long list of environmental problems. The phrase goes down especially well when what cannot go on like this is not actually defined. However, what are we talking about when defining a positive aim such as sustainable development? There is still unclarity about this, despite numerous workshops and theme publications. Is this a problem?

To some it is not such a problem since they believe sustainable development is primarily an expression which mobilises people towards a sustainable society. In this respect it is a view with which we can side. By using these and other magic

words, environmental policy certainly appeals to the imagination of many: surveys demonstrate that it has considerable support. Public support..., every politician's dream and undoubtedly a necessary precondition for significant changes in society. However, the readiness to start out 'en route', without a clear idea of the aim, seems to me not only to be unwise but also tiring. After all: 'If you don't much care where you want to get to, then it doesn't matter which way you go'.¹ Others will say, 'you may be right, but whatever you do, don't turn the precise definition of the direction into an academic discussion, because that will most probably lead us nowhere, and it will furthermore lead to a delay which is unacceptable from an environmental point of view'. Their message is as follows: let's begin by banning all those activities which are clearly unsustainable. This definitely sounds sensible, since it is certainly not difficult to draw up a reasonable long-term plan in this way. Finally, those with a scientific-philosophical mentality suspect that the term may even have heuristic value, because it poses a challenge to work towards sustainability through practical experience. In this way an environmental variation of 'seek and ye shall find' is created, a strategy which is familiar to bible readers. They too seem to be right, since now that a great many citizens are concerned about the environment, more creative solutions are being devised than the first environmental saviours could ever have hoped for.

In short, it appears that there is little need for theoretical reflection, and that there is every reason to shift the attention to practical solutions: scientifically, by making a concept such as sustainability more operational and setting up actual, usable indicators of sustainability, and with respect to policy, by actually executing the plans drawn up.

Even so, it is necessary to reflect on the environmental issues in both the Netherlands and abroad. One is, firstly, struck by a remarkable paradox. Despite wide political and social support, and despite the many plans which look reasonable on paper, the practical implementation of environmental policy and the actual state of nature and the environment appear to be poor. While recognising the positive aspects, and appreciating the considerable effort made, it can be claimed that the Netherlands compares unfavourably with many other European countries which achieve much less on paper.² Many emission objectives are not being achieved, and each year the number of miles driven and flown increase; the state of flora and fauna is deteriorating and changing far too rapidly; and most waste is treated in exactly the same way as 1000 years ago, namely dumped or incinerated; most of the environmental budget is spent on soil sanitation – a cleaning technology with a sustainability return, environmental return and health return which is lamentably low per invested guilder. Many reasons can be given for this failure, or should I say, for the implementation of policies which fall short of expectations. Naturally, one can blame the government since it is primarily responsible for 'policy'. However, it would appear sensible to look further, since society itself does not appear to be very willing to

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support the practical implementation of environmental policy. The new trend which appears to be necessary has as yet not become established. I fear that the solution to this is not 'more of the same' (effort, money and time). It is becoming increasingly apparent that culturally defined determinants, which are not easily influenced or changed, lie behind many 'every-day' environmental problems. Their solution appears to come up against substantial opposition on a more basic level.

How does this tally with the enormous amount of attention and the large level of support given to environmental issues?

In this article I would like to defend the proposition that the limited progress made with respect to the environment – despite all the good intentions – could in fact be due to a potential conflict between 'quality' and sustainable development. In other words: our interpretation of the concept of 'quality' is not compatible with the aims of sustainability. The consequences for research and policy of accepting this proposition are discussed.

2. QUALITY

The fact that, besides sustainability, quality is an important and necessary consideration has gradually been recognised in environmental research. In the Dutch National Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP), the advancement of 'quality' is stated to be one of the requirements for achieving a sustainable development. This seems right to me. Not only survival, but the nature of what survives is of great importance. Generally defined, the environmental issue is concerned with the sustainability, 'the maintenance', of the present man-environment relationship. However, since no one doubts that this relationship can be maintained in 'some way or other', discussion should be directed towards that 'some way or other'. Thus the character, the nature of the man-environment relationship becomes the essence of the problem, and the concept of 'quality' becomes a key concept in the discussion of environmental problems. Unfortunately, the development of this concept has been very insubstantial and very one-sided up to now. Instead, most attention has been paid to sustainability.³ The concept of quality has so far been used only with respect to the three environmental elements, soil, water and air (the general and special environmental quality), products ('green' being an extra characteristic of quality) and the general idea that environmental pollution harms the quality of life (especially personal health). However, the meaning governments attach to quality in these cases is not immediately clear. Further definition of the concept is therefore necessary.

Numerous definitions can be found in the literature.⁴ A more or less 'official' description given by the Dutch Institute for Normalisation according to the International Standardisation Organisation (ISO), is as follows: 'Quality is

defined by all those characteristics of a product or service which are necessary to meet statutory or self-evident needs.⁵ The fact that quality is a collective concept, in which it is possible to differentiate between several sub-aspects, is clearly expressed in the first part of the definition. I believe that the word 'needs' at the end of the definition could be substituted by the word 'functions'. When using the word 'needs', the emphasis is on that for which the product or service is of importance. When using the word 'functions' however, one thinks more of satisfying concrete needs by using the product or service. Both terms express the fact that quality has a *relational* aspect. If the needs of a person, and as result of this a function, change, this will automatically influence the quality of the product or service. Besides being relational, quality is also *relative*, since it has no absolute size. Something can only have (more or less) quality with respect to a reference. This is not sufficiently expressed in the definition given above. The counterpart of quality in a different field would not be 'income', but rather 'prosperity'. One's income can as a rule be fixed objectively, and amounts to a certain number of guilders per year. Whether this can be seen as 'prosperity', is dependent on a subjectively chosen reference. The reference chosen could be the Dutch average income, one's neighbours' incomes, or those of the Americans. In the Dutch governmental White Paper 'The quality of care' this relative aspect is emphasised, since quality is defined as: 'the level of similarity between an actual situation on the one hand, and an expected, desired or required situation on the other'.⁶ The use of the word 'situation' shows a comprehensive approach. The authors of this governmental White Paper do not solely think along the lines of material wealth. Such a comprehensive approach is necessary for the scope of this article, since the concept of quality can be applied to very divergent quantities. Besides products and services, one can also think of soil, air, ecosystems and even 'existence' as such as possessing quality. However, these quantities must be well-defined whenever they are used, since otherwise the concept will lose its usefulness.

A definition which would do justice to what has been postulated above may be the following: 'Quality is the level at which a quantity satisfies the function which it is expected to satisfy'. All related to somebody or something and over a well defined period of time.

Keeping this general definition in mind, we will return to the main proposition concerning the (potential) conflict between the key concepts in the present environmental issue: namely, sustainability and quality.

3. QUALITY VERSUS SUSTAINABILITY?

On the face of it, there seems to be no conflict between sustainability and quality, certainly not if we focus on what I would call the 'wasteful' side of our national household. Both the positive and negative aspects of sustainability and quality

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seem to be comparable with one another. The less wasteful a process is, the more quality it has and the more sustainable it is, and vice versa. By regarding the 'environment' as a relevant factor in the functions of products, goods and services, it is possible to make gains at one and the same time in both quality and the environment. At present we are still producing and consuming in a fairly environmentally unfriendly fashion. Many processes can be made energetically more efficient and economical, the unit use of raw materials can be greatly reduced and the application of environmentally unfriendly materials can be decreased still further. The fact that a more sustainable and environmentally friendly approach is not only possible, but would be perfectly fitting in our modern society which is geared towards quality improvement, is applicable in all these cases. Especially because in this way the same 'level' of goods and services can be achieved with less environmental pressure. In many cases the level is actually increased. Many people believe (or do they hope?) that the solution to the environmental issue can be achieved along these lines. The key words 'clean technology' and 'sustainable production' refer to this ideal. In fact, it is evident that much environmental quality *can* be gained along these lines. One example may suffice: anyone comparing present-day production of steel with that of 10, 20 and 50 years ago, will be impressed by the progress achieved and the existing possibilities in this field.

Where then is the assumed incompatibility between quality and sustainability?

I believe that it can be found in the implicit assumption that an improvement in quality is always a good step in the direction of a sustainable future. Unfortunately this is not necessarily the case.

One of the causes is that when striving towards an improvement in quality, consideration of the factor of 'the environment' is often *insufficient* and *unbalanced*. Thus Tromp⁷ recently emphasised the fact that the use of energy and the environmental-friendliness of materials may be taken into account in the production stage and in the practical use of products, but that this does not always occur in the recycling stage. He demonstrates that in this case, improvement in quality can lead to problems. The development and application of new and energy-efficient techniques and materials can lead to products which cannot be recycled, or can only be recycled at a high (environmental) cost. The latter is incompatible with the first aim of sustainability: the closing of cycles in as far as this is possible. With respect to this, Tromp speaks of an improvement in the 'functional quality', at the expense of the 'sustainable quality'. I cannot adopt these particular terms, in view of my definition, but his line of reasoning is clear and, to my mind, right. Improvement in quality and sustainability are only compatible, if *all* the relevant environmental aspects are considered in determining the concept of quality. The domain on to which the concept of quality is to be released must not be too small. In the pursuit of improvement in quality, consideration of the factor of 'the environment' can be both insufficient and

unbalanced. Strange though this may seem, sustainability may then suffer at the expense of too much (environmental) quality. It is often forgotten that every activity is essentially environmentally damaging, even 'clean technology', recycling and – without doubt – 'clean-up' technology. The production of a cleaner (end)product, like the production of any product, requires a certain amount of energy, raw materials and space. The law of diminishing returns applies also in this field: the cleaner an object is, the higher the effort required to produce or recycle it. The unavoidability of an activity, and the use to which it is put, must also be taken into consideration. Since cycles can never be totally closed, and since losses in a system must always be taken into consideration, improvements in the quality of the system at high costs will become more important as the possibilities of completely replacing the activity with a better alternative are growing. The practical implication of this trend is that a decision must be taken on the basis of the *net* environmental gain per invested amount of money. This decision must not be limited to the activity itself, but must have a wider scope. Several products/services can often have the same purpose or fulfil the same function. It is not the product, but its function which should hold a central position in the search for sustainability.

TWO EXAMPLES.

I shall first discuss the approach to soil pollution already mentioned, a typical clean-up technology which even in the Netherlands involves millions of guilders. I certainly do not wish to claim that this pollution cannot cause any harm, or that there is any justification for dumping the rubbish, but I do still believe that most of the money is poorly spent. Despite the enormous investments, the sanitation backlog is gigantic. Total sanitation of every polluted site is not only forbiddingly expensive but also technically impossible. In most cases the problems are literally shifted and some sanitation techniques even result in polluted residue which is actually more toxic. The general quality requirement of 'multi- functionality',⁸ and the resulting, stringent norms, lead to clean-up operations which completely overshoot themselves. In many cases it is possible to achieve sufficient results by applying a clean upper layer of the soil, the layer people live on in a residential area, by applying the 'spring roll' -packing method ('wrapping' the contaminated soil in plastic) to very seriously polluted areas (hotspots), and by preventing seepage by means of isolation in very sensitive areas.⁹ The time, energy and money saved can be spent on stimulating production processes aimed at sustainability.

My second example is the construction and design of new incineration plants for the processing of (household) waste. What we see is that in order to avoid a third-rate solution for the processing of waste – dumping – , a second-rate technique is chosen. This then becomes so expensive, partly because of the

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absurdly high environmental quality requirements, that it effectively blocks for years what should have been the first choice solution, namely prevention and recycling. Industry, the government and the environmental movement have trapped each other. The option of incineration appeared unavoidable, given the fact that dumping leads us nowhere and given the unwillingness to take timely action concerning prevention and recycling. So while the environmental movement really wanted an economy of recycling, it did not achieve more than the proposal of 'very tough environmental emission standards' at the tactical negotiation table. The results were very large and especially very expensive ovens (more efficient), whilst both the money and enthusiasm needed for recycling were lacking. Prevention was discouraged (the ovens must be full and must burn; the use of waste paper as fuel is already being debated) and the cost of all this has been presented to us with the argument, 'you must be prepared to make some sacrifices for a clean environment'.¹⁰ Summing up, it may be said that realisation of very tough environmental demands and stimulation of (too) strict conditions for sub-optimal activities requires a disproportionately large amount of energy, raw materials and capital, and thus endangers the sustainability of the system. It appears that investment dilemmas also occur in environment-land.

4. TOO MUCH QUALITY OR THE WRONG QUALITY?

The problem pointed out by Tromp is not only apparent among comparable products, but also between totally different products. A world full of products regarded as being of 'sustainable quality' is not necessarily a sustainable world.

It is becoming increasingly evident that in a developed country such as the Netherlands, the threat to the environment is not only the amount of pollution per product but, to a much greater extent, the continuously increasing number of products per person and the increasing number of consumers. Obvious examples of this can be found in the field of transport (e.g., the large increase in the number of flights made) and also in the household sector. In the latter, it appears that the increase in the number of consumer goods and services can partly be explained by the increasing prosperity per household. However it is also strongly related to the increasing number of single households. The point is that each individual household uses a certain amount of space, energy and raw materials, even if everyone should acquire one of the energy-saving, recyclable fridges containing no CFCs – the 'sustainable quality' fridge proposed by Tromp – which is not yet available and still hypothetical.

We are faced with a complicated fabric of demographic factors when searching for reasons for the increase in the number of households. Besides the growth in population, due to high birth-rates and immigration, 'dilution of households' must be mentioned. The causes for this 'dilution of households' are both social and cultural. Though exact figures are lacking – unfortunately little

research has been carried out on this – it is plausible to suppose that besides the increasing number of elderly people living independently, the effects of divorce and the right of children to live independently of parents at an increasingly lower age, play a large part in this phenomenon. I would like to use this example to emphasise that there are definite links between processes of change in our culture and environmental issues. The implicit or explicit acceptance that the standard of living is related to a specific number of actual goods and products and the pursuit of improvement in the standard of living results in ever growing environmental pressure. The social trend towards smaller units, the consequences of families breaking up, increasing individualisation and the right to individual living space for younger people, are all demographic effects of cultural/social developments which have considerable consequences for the environment. Thus there is often a negative correlation between an increase in the standard of living and the quality of the natural environment.

This relation can be found in almost every sector of society. We all attempt to improve almost every aspect of the quality of our lives. Is there actually anyone who opposes this? The concept of progress is deeply rooted in our culture. No-one wants uncontrolled economic growth and definitely no polluting industry in one's backyard. However we all want progress. This progress is partly relative since we create certain reference points; but it is also partly absolute. This is because our society must become safer, health care must be improved and the standard of education must be raised. We see the same results almost everywhere: on balance, increased appropriation of natural resources and of the physical space of non-human organisms. After all, there is no such thing as a 'free lunch' on earth.

It would be a good idea to pause to realise that our discussion of the concept of quality has dealt mainly with human quality. Since we have defined quality as a relational concept, it is easy to see that changes in quality have a completely different meaning for nature and non-human organisms. What is seen as an improvement in quality for the one, can be a loss of quality for the other. Generally speaking, environmental policy should aim more at a 'green' interpretation of the concept of 'sustainability'. If not, there is a very real danger that we will be heading towards a *clean, but silent or empty* world. A world without cadmium in the soil, but also without snipe or bittern.

How can society be turned towards sustainability, given this negative feedback between the quality of our existence and the quality of the environment? Must we be satisfied with lower quality? Certainly, as far as too much (wrong) quality is concerned. However, a complete break with the trend – inherent in our culture – towards an improvement in quality would seem impossible and is in many respects undesirable. Consequently, we should focus our search for 'quality' in a different direction. I believe that research and policy are beginning to pay some attention to this direction, and I can find three starting points for it in current discussion on environmental policy.

The economist Pen recently suggested in the magazine *Milieu*¹¹ that we should direct growth – the economic aspect of quality improvement – towards activities requiring a limited use of energy and raw materials. This means, for example, making more music and flying less. His message is clear, even though he does not believe that this change will come about easily; moreover, he also has some macro-economic doubts. The sociologist Goudsblom has recently described the behavioural changes required to achieve sustainable development in terms of a ‘process of civilisation à la Elias’. Environmentally unfriendly behaviour must become uncivilised, not done, comparable to smoking in public in our society. Finally, Goudsblom’s colleague Schuyt, in a recent article, lists three ways of changing people’s behaviour: one of them is gradually to change our ‘image of the world’. He believes that this will be a fundamental and slow process, which may take several decades.¹²

These are relatively new ideas in the environmental field, especially in government circles. So far, social-scientific research in the environmental field has been concerned mainly with the question of how we can get people to behave in the way we – the government – want. Banning, informing, rewarding, the market, etc., have all been considered, and in the end each measure appears to have limited effect, something its supporters do not always realise. Given the enormous range of possibilities and difficulties, it would appear obvious that several instruments should be deployed rather than choosing just one. Even though much can still be improved and achieved by way of influencing behaviour, I hardly believe that a sustainable society will be furthered in this way. The changes are too small and incoherent. Changes in environmental behaviour which are in keeping with our present ideas about improvements in the quality of existence will be accepted relatively quickly and will also become more deeply rooted. Car owners like to boast about their catalytic converter (good for the environment!¹³) and so do house owners about their energy-saving exterior lighting. However, the more drastic changes are being picked up very slowly, and there is much opposition to them. Less car use – or health technology, etc. – is seen as a loss of quality, as a decline in standards and as a sacrifice that will not be made voluntarily. For the individual, the advantages of changes are outweighed by the disadvantages. It is not only a social dilemma – if I’m the only one that does it, I will only have the disadvantages and no advantages; therefore I won’t do it – but also a temporal dilemma, and a serious under-estimation of the expected advantages compared with the directly experienced disadvantages. Cleaner air and more space for nature cannot compete with ‘being able to travel always and everywhere individually’. Accusations of short-sightedness, ignorance or pure materialism will not lead anywhere.

In order to understand this behaviour, it may be profitable to look for parallels in other fields. For example, why are people willing to make a ‘sacrifice’ now by contributing towards their pension, knowing full well they will not benefit until much later. I can think of three reasons: (1) the conceivability of the benefit

is great; (2) the chance that you will reap the benefit is thought to be high; (3) the expectation of the advantage increases the quality of life now. An insurance company advertises this happy expectation by calling it the 'Swisslife feeling'. In short: in a way it is not a 'sacrifice' at all. It is almost an improvement in quality, this feeling of being properly insured, this 'Swisslife feeling'.

Can we achieve a situation in which people are willing to invest in a sustainable society? Is it real to strive after an environmental counterpart of the Swisslife feeling?

In order to do so, along with the three reasons mentioned above, (social scientific) research should be directed differently. In the short term, further analysis will be necessary of the relationship between our concept of quality and our limited environmental and natural resources, especially in order to differentiate apparent contrasts from actual contrasts. The issue of relative scarcity – absolute scarcity being an incontrovertible fact – should be studied in more depth. Social scientists can then make the link between the cultural and environmental philosophical approach of, for example, Hirsch and Achterhuis,¹⁴ and the approach of environmentalists, which is directed towards the physical environment. I believe that a complete reassessment of our concept of quality is an important step in the direction of a sustainable relationship between humanity and the environment. In order to achieve change, a fundamental reorientation of our code of norms and values is necessary. Nature and the environment cannot be side-issues in our present idea of quality. Available resources are limited and space on earth is limited.

What's new Pussycat? Is this perhaps 'Limits to Growth' in disguise? Haven't we known about lifestyle, quality of life and especially frugality for some time now?

Yes and no.

Yes, since the heart of the matter, finite resources and the relation with their disproportionate exploitation, is as old as mankind itself.

No, because the validity of it on a global level has only just begun to impose itself unavoidably upon us. And it is only now beginning to become evident that in western society we are faced with the challenge of maintaining or increasing quality by rediscovering it.

NOTES

¹ From Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, Penguin, 1972, p. 88. As Kemeny (*A Philosopher looks at Science*, 1959, p. 89) makes clear, science cannot tell us where to go, but after this decision is made on other grounds, it can tell us the best way to get there.

² R. van der Laan and A. Nentjes. *Het Nederlandse milieu in Europees perspectief (The Dutch Environment in a European Perspective)*. Research memorandum no.10. Depart-

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ment of Economy and Public Finances. Faculty of Law, State University of Groningen, 1991. A shorter version was published in *ESB* (Economisch-Statistische Berichten) 24-6-1992, pp. 621-625. Ten European countries are listed according to their environmental scores. The Netherlands can be found at the tail end of the list for many of the measures considered.

³ For a review and elaboration on the concepts 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability' I refer to numbers 3,6,7,10,11 & 12 in the references. I refer especially to 2 and to the appendix in 4 (Daly & Cobb) for a practical elaboration.

⁴ See, for a recent review, van Omme 1992.

⁵ Dutch Institute of Normalisation, *Kwaliteit; termen en definities (Quality; Terms and Definitions)*. NEN-ISO norm 8402, 1989, Delft.

⁶ *Kwaliteit van Zorg (Quality of Care)* Tweede Kamer (House of Commons), 1990-1991, 22113, no. 2.

⁷ O.S.Tromp, *Materiaalgebruik: functionele kwaliteit versus duurzame kwaliteit (The use of materials and energy, functional quality and sustainable quality)*. *Milieu*, 1993(1), pp. 43-46.

⁸ According to this principle no man-made restrictions are acceptable in fulfilling every function for every soil. Functions ranging from carpark and children's playing ground to garden or nature reserve.

⁹ Although this unpleasant truth is beginning to dawn and the approach is becoming more 'realistic', the illusion of a 'toxic-free' Holland is still alive, see *Algemeen Dagblad*, 28 november 1992.

¹⁰ Now that the amount of household waste in the prognosis seems to be smaller than expected due to the success of the separate collection of organic waste, the failure of the incineration policy is immediately obvious. The taxpayers in the Province of Zuid-Holland are now paying for the Dfl. 120 million (!) which has already been invested in an incinerator which now appears to be unnecessary as a result of their environmentally friendly behaviour.

¹¹ *Milieu*, 1992/5, pg. 136-137

¹² *Milieu*, 1992/2, pg. 43-48

¹³ Research has shown that the label 'environmentally friendly' can actually stimulate its use. A notorious example is the use of the energy saving light bulb, which is sometimes switched on for so much longer that saving energy is no longer achieved.

¹⁴ I especially think of these authors' approach to the concept of scarcity. Hirsch (1977) proposes that social limits are much more important than physical limits. The latter are far away and uncertain. Achterhuis (1988) emphasises the 'created' character of scarcity as a result of what he calls 'mimetic desire'. It is clear that these approaches are relevant to the concept of quality discussed in this article.

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