

Sustainability and Human Values¹

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Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. Current concerns for sustainability are *supported* by the “facts” that everything of use to humans, including the things essential to sustain human life on earth must come from the earth, and beyond self-sufficiency, must come by way of human relationships or society. Beyond meeting needs through personal relationships, sustainability also depends on an impersonal economy. Thus, it is generally accepted that a sustainable human society must be ecologically sound, socially just, and economically viable. Lacking any one of these three requisites, a society is not sustainable - at least not at the level of efficiency essential to support even today's global population. The degradation of natural ecosystems, depletion of natural resources, growing social and economic inequity, and lingering global economic recession are all “facts” that provide strong evidence to support concerns for the sustainability of human life on earth.

However, concerns for sustainability actually are not rooted in “facts” but instead in human “values.” Those who are concerned about the unsustainability of human life on earth implicitly assume that humans have some “worthy or good” purpose on earth or that humanity is “worth” sustaining. They also assume that sustainability of human life is interdependent with the other living things on earth, otherwise there would be no concern for the integrity of natural ecosystems. Finally, concerns for sustainability reflect a belief that humans have a unique and specific responsibility as stewards or caretakers of the earth. Otherwise, there would be no reason to question whether the pursuit of individual, economic well-being diminishes the greater good of society and threatens the future of humanity. None of these assumptions can be “proven” using today's generally accepted approach to science. These are “human values,” not “facts.”

The “fact of the matter” is that what facts are considered cause for concern, and even what is considered fact and what is not, is a matter of human values. There has been an ongoing philosophic discussion concerning the “fact versus value distinction.”³ I am not a philosopher, but the discussion apparently dates back to David Hume in the 1700s who stated something to the effect that we cannot derive an “ought” for an “is”: meaning we can't determine what we “ought” to from the *facts* of our current situation or what “is.” What we ought to do is a human value judgment, not a fact, and thus the “fact-value distinction.” The philosophical discussion apparently centers on whether facts can be separated from values and thus whether facts are actually ever value-free.

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³ Wikipedia, “fact-value distinction,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fact%E2%80%93value_distinction

I agree with Kant's proposition that facts are different from values. However, I believe that everything we accept as "fact" is contingent on the acceptance of some root set of common "values" by which we agree to distinguish "facts" from other "values." What we now accept as facts would be different from what we would accept as facts if we accepted a different set of human values. I also agree with Hume that we can't derive values from facts. I believe this true is because all facts are derived from values. If so, facts are different or distinct from values, but facts and values are in fact inseparable.

Equally important, we decide which facts are "relevant" and which are not, depending our "values." Our most basic human values are reflected in our worldviews; in common terminology, meaning how we think the world works and where we as humans fit within it. We cannot "prove" how the world works or where we fit because these beliefs or values determine what we are willing to accept as facts and what we are willing to accept as proof. Equally important, the reason we form these beliefs or accept these values is so we can determine how we "ought" to live our lives. In other words, our perceptions of which facts are relevant and which are not depend on what we humans value in life and thus how we think we ought to live our lives. In a sense, what "is" is determined by what "ought" to be.

With regard to the question of sustainability, I believe we have created an unsustainable economy and society because we have accepted as facts only those things that were based on a value system that is inherently in conflict with the values of sustainability - for example, the beliefs of scientism and economism.

Scientism reflects a mechanistic worldview, in that it treats the world as a highly complex, sophisticated system or mechanism with interrelated but separable parts. The scientific method, which requires formulating and empirically testing hypotheses is viewed as the only legitimate means of acquiring knowledge or true understanding of reality. Observing, measuring, and empirically verifying cause and effect relationships is accepted as the most authoritative and valuable means of human understanding, to the exclusion of other ways of knowing. It is reductionist in that it assumes all natural, social, and economic phenomena can be understood only by reducing these complex phenomena to their essential elements or parts and analyzing specific cause and effect relationships. If the results of an experiment cannot be replicated and confirmed by other scientists, any conclusions are considered to be unjustified and thus are not accepted as knowledge or truth.

Economism accepts the worldview of scientism and treats human well-being as being intrinsically sensory or materialistic. It denies the existence of purpose or meaning in human life, in any sense other than animalistic urges to seek pleasure and avoid pain, which are common to all sentient beings. The existence of feelings beyond physical and mental pain and pleasure cannot be proven - meaning isolated, replicated, or validated using the scientific method. Socially acceptable behaviors, such as compassion, are rationalized as selfish acts in responses to, or in anticipation of, positive or negative stimuli from other members of society. Ethical acts or altruism or selflessness are considered to be irrational or metaphysical. The purpose for human actions motivated purely by social or ethical values would have to come from some higher level of organization, meaning from a spiritual or transcendent realm of reality. The

existence of such a realm would challenge the economists' materialistic worldview. Since existence of a higher realm or order of things cannot be proven, is not accepted as reality.

Concerns for sustainability reflect a value system that cannot be derived from scientific facts, meaning it cannot be derived from facts that are considered acceptable within the belief system of scientism. You simply cannot prove there is any logical reason or useful purpose for sustaining human life on earth with a science that is based on a value system that denies the existence of purpose. The facts that are relevant in addressing questions of sustainability include indicators of moral and ethical intents and behaviors, which indicate whether humanity is capable of sustainable behavior or humanity is actually “worthy” of sustaining. Scientism and economism label such indicators as values rather than facts and discard them as being irrelevant. I believe this was what Pope Francis was talking about in the section of the Encyclical that deals with technology and the failure of our wisdom to keep pace with our technical knowledge.

At Maharishi University of Management some of us are working on a concepts of “deep sustainability”⁴ which is rooted in a fundamentally different belief system or system of human values from those of scientism and economism. It begins with a specific acceptance of the human value, which cannot be proven, that all life on earth, including human life, has purpose and meaning, and thus is worthy of sustaining. It accepts the common human value that we are multidimensional with physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. We believe that “self” is an emergent property of physical, mental, and spiritual beings. We also believe that humans have unique abilities and thus unique responsibilities as caretakers of the earth.

Deep sustainability rejects the “scientism,” while embracing continued use of the scientific method in addressing issues of the non-living world, where it is most appropriate. Unlike “scientism,” deep sustainability is not reductionist or analytical. Living organisms, organizations, or ecosystems cannot be reduced or separated into their components for analysis without losing the essence of the whole. Living systems are holistic. They have emergent properties that are not present in any of their component parts that disappear when wholes are reduced to their component parts. Just as health is an emergent property of living organisms that have physical, mental, and spiritual integrity, sustainability is an emergent property of natural, social, and economic communities and societies that have ecological, social, and economic integrity. Sustainability cannot be found in individual dimensions or parts; sustainability emerges only from wholes.

Deep sustainability rejects “economism.” It accepts the necessity of *internalizing* the economic value of *external* ecological and social costs and benefits, but rejects the reduction or diminution of social and ethical values to their important but marginal economic values. Deep sustainability values social and ethical relationships because of their unique contributions to human happiness and well-being. Quality of life is an emergent property of the ethical, social, and economic dimensions of human well-being, with important aspects that are fundamentally non-economic in nature. Deep sustainability calls for going beyond the typical approaches to

⁴ John Ikerd, Lonnie Gamble, and Travis Cox, “Deep Sustainability; The Essentials,” A whitepaper licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) , paragraph 4. <https://sites.google.com/site/sustainabilitydeep/> 2015.

sustainability, which are using non-renewable resources more efficiently and substituting renewable for renewable resources - only when it's profitable to do so. Deep sustainability advocates radical redesigning human economies and societies to reflect the natural hierarchy among ethical, social, and economic values in determining overall quality of life.

The results emerging from the worldview of deep sustainability would be fundamentally different from those of instrumental or shallow sustainability. Social and ethical values would motivate people within societies to join together through systems of governance at local, national, and international levels to make the long-term personal and impersonal economic investments necessary to sustain the health and vitality of nature and society, upon which the sustainability of economies ultimately depends. The results would be renewal and regeneration rather than continued depletion and degeneration. Nature and society would be healed and restored rather than destroyed. Healthy natural ecosystems and societies would move toward greater abundance and quality of life rather than continue on the path toward lifelessness and entropy.

However, none of the “facts” or “motivations” essential for sustainability make sense within the mechanistic worldview that supports scientism and economism. Sustainability depends on a different set of human values which accepts a new set of relevant “facts” capable of guiding humanity to a new and better worldview of the future. The hope is that the human species will use its emotional and spiritual intelligence to reject the well-meaning worldview of the past and present. Regardless of past benefits and good intentions for the future, scientism and economism have nonetheless failed to sustain a desirable quality of human life on earth for many if not most people and now threatens the very future of humanity. It is time to create a new set of facts for a new and better world for both current and future generations by adopting a new and better set of human values.