PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF SUSTAINABLE HUMAN SYSTEMS

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Summary

The development of *Homo sapiens* is in a dangerously paradoxical predicament. Whilst accumulation and consumption of material wealth is almost universally presumed to be the way to achieve individual well-being, its impacts are also undermining the capacity of physical systems to support life—and therefore collective well-being. Furthermore, evidence suggests that, beyond a certain level, increasing material wealth ceases to result in an improved sense of well-being.

Most research and policy concerned with sustainable development focuses on ameliorating the ecological and social effects of human behavior. A psychodynamically informed framework is used in this article to show how psychological (including unconscious) dynamics and cultural dynamics of meaning, value, and belief underlie behavior and need to be recognized as the root causes of threats to the sustainability of ecological systems. A truly systemic understanding of human ecology requires that these dynamics are taken into account. So does achievement of sustainable development in the long-term. It is also argued that non-material forms of wealth hold the key both to halting both ecological disintegration and to enhancing human well-being and development.

The article concludes that when the special purposes of sub-systems within a society come to dominate, they inevitably undermine the integrity of general purpose social and ecological systems on which the society as a whole depends for its sustainability. Contemporary free-market society is heading in this direction with the dominance of interests emphasizing material accumulation and consumption. However, there are indications that material wealth as a route to human fulfillment is increasingly experienced as unsatisfactory, and that interest in non-material routes is re-emerging, especially in affluent societies. If this shift continues, pressures on ecological systems will diminish as a consequence.

1. Introduction

Ecological and social disturbances are caused by human behavior that is, in turn, the expression of norms, values, and ideas about how to achieve well-being and development. Prevailing norms and values see well-being and development primarily in material terms. Whilst material wealth is clearly necessary, beyond a certain point it is not sufficient to generate psychological and emotional well-being. Human development is therefore not solely a question of maximizing accumulation and consumption of material wealth. This becomes self-evident when we consider that many of the wealthiest of people still do not experience satisfaction and fulfillment. Yet the assumption continues that maximizing material wealth inextricably results in well-being and development. It also generates a dangerous paradox, because material production and consumption inevitably entails ecological impacts, no matter how efficient technologies may be. (See *Bipolar Feedback*)

The paradox is that the accumulation of material and economic wealth in the belief that it leads to gratification, well-being, and development is undermining processes that are essential to the future survival, sustainability and therefore wellbeing of every member of the species. Development that is not sustainable is a contradiction in terms. Development that degrades the contextual processes that human life and activity depend upon cannot last and is inevitably self-destructive. As such, it cannot genuinely be considered developmental. The best it can offer is short-term, temporary gratification that has to be constantly "topped-up" to maintain it, so placing ever greater pressure on ecological systems. A worldview based on material, economic development alone thus traps itself into two positive feedback (i.e. self-amplifying) effects. One is immediate—because material wealth does not ultimately satisfy. The other is longer-term—because

unbridled material production and consumption places pressure on life-support systems. (See *General Systems Wealtanschauung*)

If the human species is to place itself on a more long-term, sustainable footing, changes are required in how human beings believe they can best achieve a sense of well-being for themselves. The human psyche and culture are therefore part and parcel of human ecology, not apart from it. Physical and social problems are the outcomes and effects of psychological and cultural causes which should therefore be placed at the centre of sustainability science.

This perspective is not a new one. Sir Julian Huxley (1957), in *New Bottles for New Wine* describes the human species' "capacities for conceptual thought and language, for self-conscious awareness and purpose, for accumulating and pooling its conscious experience" as being an emergent property of the evolutionary process and therefore not separate from the ecosphere as a whole. On the contrary, they influence it profoundly. "For do not let us forget," he continues, "that the human species is as radically different from any of the microscopic single-celled animals that lived a thousand million years ago as they were from a fragment of stone or metal...Whether he wants to or not, whether he is conscious of what he is doing or not, he is in point of fact determining the future direction of evolution on this earth. That is his inescapable destiny, and the sooner he realizes it and starts believing in it, the better for all concerned."

One of Huxley's major concerns was that the condition of Earth's life-support systems is increasingly contingent upon human willingness to use these capacities responsibly. Humans are now "the spearhead of the evolutionary process" not only in terms of technology and the capacity to manipulate the rest of nature, but through the capacity to be conscious of the effects of our behavior on each other and our life-support systems. Huxley again:

> "The process of evolution as we know it today exists on three distinct levels—the inorganic or cosmic, the biological or organic, and the human or psychosocial. There is complete continuity between the three phases or levels, but yet a critical point between each one and the next, after which the process alters in character."

Unfortunately, psychosocial dimensions of evolution have long been neglected by both natural and social scientists, notwithstanding Huxley's conviction that "evolution shatters the pretence of human isolationism" and "is the most powerfully integrative of concepts, forcibly and inevitably uniting nebulae and human emotions, life and its environment, religion and material nature, all into a single whole".

Huxley's one-time student, Sir Alister Hardy, is one of the few who took up this research agenda but, since he could only do so towards the end of his life due to academic peer pressure, his work of studying the adaptive significance of different types of experience, especially religious experience, remained unfinished.

2. Dimensions of Human Life-support Systems and Sustainability

2.1 Outer Dimensions: Physical Sustainability

Human societies depend on the physical life-support systems of planet Earth—the "environment" of environmentalism. These systems consist of immensely complex patterns of relationship between non-living, inorganic components and living organisms themselves. This dependent relationship is summarized in Figure 1 (adapted from Anthony Wilden's book *The Rules Are No Game*). It is a picture of *necessity*.

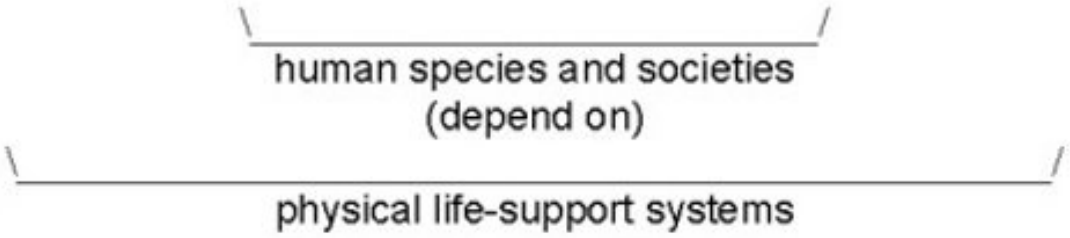

Figure 1. The existence of human beings and societies depends on physical life-support systems.

Physical life-support systems are clearly necessary to physical human survival. However, physical survival is not sufficient on its own to provide for the satisfaction and fulfillment that individual humans yearn for in their lives. This has been known for thousands of years. The biblical wisdom that "Human beings cannot live on bread alone..." strongly suggests that human fulfillment is not synonymous with mere physiological subsistence. Beyond this, people have subtler and less tangible needs that contribute to what can be thought of as emotional and psychological sustainability. Security, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, a desire to help others, and a general experience of life as meaningful to name but a few—all of these help support the inner, experiential life of human beings. Lacking this type of development, human beings can feel demoralized and worthless. Life can seem emotionally empty or unsustainable.

Most research, policy, advocacy, and other activity concerned with environmental disintegration focuses on physical problems such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. It is driven by fear about the effects that human impacts on physical systems will have on the latter's capacity to sustain human life and activity into the future. What tends to be overlooked is that these "environmental problems" are symptoms that originate in human activity and behavior which are, in turn, informed by psychological and cultural factors. It is these underlying causes that form the focus of this article and to which we now turn.

2.2 Inner Dimensions: Psycho-emotional Sustainability and Development

The starting point for considering the central significance of human psychological and emotional dynamics in the sustainability of physical life-support systems is the observation that human beings yearn to experience well-being and fulfillment in their lives. This yearning underpins their motivation and behavior. It impels them into activities that inevitably impact on the external environment. Environmental problems are, therefore, a function of deeper psychological (and cultural) factors to a far greater extent than most people care to acknowledge. Consumerist behavior, for example, is

informed by the cultural assumption (or belief) that human well-being is ultimately achieved through material wealth and acquisition. Human development has, therefore, come to be seen as synonymous with economic development. Few would deny that this has far-reaching ecological (and social) consequences.

The field of psychodynamics—beginning with Freud but developed substantially since then—has shed much light on these inner, experiential dynamics that underpin human behavior and its impacts. It observes that human yearnings do not begin at adulthood but arises from the moment a person is born. At this point, it is expressed as a need for food, security, and love. The baby is totally dependent on its mother, or other carer. The baby experiences distress and anxiety if these things are withheld, and temporary satisfaction when they are provided. According to Eric Erikson, the baby learns to trust that the person on whom the baby depends completely will indeed provide for it regularly and when needed. This is not unlike the trust that human beings have in natural processes—that they will continue to provide for whatever is needed, and to absorb the impacts of their activities. Unfortunately, these impacts have begun to accumulate to a point beyond the capacity of the Earth to provide. Hence current fears about the unsustainability of life-support systems. Emotions once associated with the mother do not disappear as a person grows up. Furthermore, the emotions are no longer expressed purely and simply as immediate needs for physical nourishment, security, and so on. Even if the latter are satisfied, the *experience* of yearning continues and is often felt as lack, emptiness, or desire for fulfillment, completeness, and satisfaction. As adults, these feelings are displaced onto other objects—other people, beliefs and ideologies, and material things—which come to be seen as the means of resolving these yearnings and are therefore desired and sought after.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, made an important distinction between *need*, *demand,* and *desire* in human life. *Need* equates with *physical* survival and sustainability. It must be satisfied by consuming and assimilating elements from the physical environment. Otherwise the organism dies. Consumption is necessary for existence. However, since physical satiation is not sufficient to bring about full and permanent satisfaction in humans we continue to experience *desire*. This remains as a perpetual, intangible craving for "something more" that we seek to provide life with meaningfulness and satisfaction. This is not desire for any particular thing. It is a nagging experience which is, however, projected into the outside world and, as it were, attaches itself to products, ideologies, religions, theories, people, and other *objects of desire* in the belief that acquisition or adoption of them will lead to satisfaction. They are seen as promising to fill the sense of lack. In Lacan's terms, the intangible desires have become concrete *demands*.

Once desire has taken on tangible form through these objects, the objects themselves become the focus of a person's attention. Actually, they are no more than symbols or metaphors for the desire itself. Nevertheless, individuals continue to identify so closely with the object concerned that their whole lives can be dedicated to pursuing them. The objects of desire—the *demands*—can never ultimately provide satisfaction because they are merely symbols of the intangible desire. It is not the objects that are desired but what they represent—a subjective *experience* of satisfaction or wholeness. This, by definition, is internal to the person. It is in the mind.

This dynamic becomes clear if one pauses to reflect on one's own experience of acquiring a particular object of desire. Soon afterwards, once the craving for it has ceased, the object loses its appeal, invariably fails to come up to expectations, and finally becomes an ordinary object again—an object that is no longer imbued with the properties of desire projected onto it by the imagination. Experience of desire soon returns again, attaches itself to a new object and creates a new demand to pursue. The dynamic begins again.

In spite of endless experiences of this sort in everyone's life, humans expend vast amounts of energy and resources behaving like this, in the belief that such behavior will eventually yield the object of desire that will bring "once and for all" satisfaction. Yet, as Anthony Wilden has put it, "...the impossibility of satisfying such a desire...is like trying to find a hole to fill up a hole".

In present-day culture, this can be seen as an underlying psychological dynamic that drives consumer behavior, the consumerist, economic growth model of development, and consequent ecological and social impacts.
In the final analysis, current ecological and social disintegration is rooted in what people do to try and attain well-being. We give shape to our desires by *believing* that certain activities will bring satisfaction more than others. Actions and behavior are therefore generated and shaped by a combination of experience and cultural constructions. Another way of saying this is that beliefs and worldviews are expressions of inner needs and desires. They are what make the latter *meaningful.*

It is tempting to believe that the *facts* of ecological problems speak for themselves and give rise to obvious courses of action. It is this type of thinking that overlooks the critical role that human psychology and beliefs play in causing them. Similarly, it is tempting to believe that the *facts* of experience also speak for themselves. This thinking also runs the risk of neglecting the arguments just put forward—that experience is always "made sense of" with reference to beliefs about what it means. It is therefore necessary to consider in more depth the relationship between the physical world on which human beings depend—human psychophysiology and ecological dynamics, for example, prior to being mapped out and ascribed meaning—and the beliefs and constructions that humans use to ascribe meaning to the physical world.

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Biographical Sketch

Paul Maiteny is a consultant, educator, and researcher on sustainable human development, emphasizing the inter-relatedness of psychological, organizational, societal, and ecological dimensions. Most recently he has been investigating the psychological dynamics of consumerist behavior and environmental

problems, including the types of personal experience and meanings that lead people to re-think and change their lifestyles, and whether such emotionally rooted behavior is more inherently long-lasting than that which arises solely in response to external forces such as punitive legislation or economic incentive. The research forms part of a wider agenda on the need for policy-makers, researchers and educationalists to take seriously the psychological and cultural causes of ecological and social disintegration; and the need to encourage non-material forms of wealth as a basis for ecological sustainability, personal well-being, and the development of human potential. The research has been undertaken at the Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies, an independent research organization and think-tank in London. He is a lecturer in Environmental and Development Education at South Bank University, London, and Environmental Policy in an International Context at the Open University where he has also consulted on personal development. He is also a volunteer counselor.

Previous posts include many years as an environmental manager, interpreter and educator at nature reserves and field centers, Research Fellowships at the Open University's Centre for Complexity and Change, at University College London's Geography Dept, researching natural resource management environmental conflict, communication and organizational learning, and a lectureship in human development at Westminster College, Oxford. He has degrees from University College London, Lancaster University Management School and Bocconi University, Milan. He has had a life-long fascination with patterns of nature, human meaning and experience, and how they relate to and affect each other. He sees human psychology and culture as intrinsic to systemic human ecology.