INSTITUTIONAL GLOBAL ETHICS: APPLICATIONS

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Summary

This article discusses institutional global ethics and its applications. Different approaches to applied ethics are discussed. The discussion focuses on whether a set of plausible ethical principles can be found that have global application to institutions of various forms in contexts connected with sustainability and human well-being generally. The article is divided into four major sections. Section one examines the concept of sustainability. By examining some major definitions of the term, the concept of sustainability is shown to be a morality-laden concept. There can be different conceptions of sustainability, depending on one's moral perspective. Section two discusses the Kantian approach and its implications for sustainability. The discussion focuses on Kant's two versions of categorical imperative: the formula of universal law and the formula of humanity. Throughout the discussion, a distinction between actuality-dependent and non-actuality-dependent principles is maintained so as to clarify the moral issue regarding moral obligations to future generations. Section three discusses the utilitarian approach and its implications for sustainability. The discussion focuses on the non-anthropocentric aspect of the utilitarian approach, particularly its implication for the moral considerability of animals. Section four discusses some ethical approaches that attempt to provide an ethical foundation for non-welfarist environmental concerns. The discussion focuses on three different ethical approaches: the perfectionist, the community-based, and the biocentric.

1. Introduction: The Morality-Laden Nature of the Concept of Sustainability

The term "institutional global ethics" used here refers to the ethics that explore the possibility of specifying a set of plausible ethical principles that can be applied globally to

institutions of various forms. The term does not presuppose that such a set of principles exists. Whether such a set of principles exists is subject to debate. In what follows, different approaches to applied ethics will be discussed with a view to shedding some light on the debate. The discussion, however, will focus on establishing a set of plausible ethical principles that have global applications to institutions of various forms, in contexts connected with sustainability and human well-being generally.

"Sustainability" is a term that is both ambiguous and highly contested. One influential interpretation of the term was put forward in an important report written by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED): *Our Common Future*. The WCED report defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." In other words, sustainability is conceived as an important goal that places constraints on the socioeconomic and technological processes of a society or the global community such that people of different generations, present or future, are able to meet their own needs to a satisfactory level. Accordingly, it places a moral responsibility on each generation to ensure that future generations inherit a bank of natural resources adequate for satisfying their needs. To achieve this goal, then, the WCED argues, requires fundamental changes in our practices in agriculture, energy, forestry, and other physical and industrial systems. It requires people to change their attitudes, values, and even lifestyles.

The term sustainability as defined in the WCED report, while having the merit of simplicity, is far from clear and uncontroversial. Indeed, some people find it contains inherent difficulties. Shiva, for instance, argues that the term sustainability as used by the WCED loses its important prescriptive meaning when it is linked with the concept of development, acquiring its full meaning only in the context of the modern market economy. For Shiva, development is just another term for "economic growth and commercialization," which assigns supremacy to the market economy and to its organizing principle based on profits and capital accumulation. It is exactly this concept of development that is at the root of the ecological crisis that we are presently encountering. That being the case, sustainability as understood in the form of sustainable development is deprived of its real meaning. The real meaning of sustainability, according to Shiva, requires us to take seriously "maintaining the integrity of nature's processes, cycles and rhythms."

To argue for the "real" meaning or "true" definition of a term, in this case sustainability, more often than not ends up putting forward some sort of persuasive definition in disguise. To insist on the employment of the real meaning of sustainability, then, is just another way of expressing a certain set of value judgments on environmental issues. To argue, for instance, that the true definition of sustainability must give primacy to maintaining the integrity of nature's processes, cycles, and rhythms is merely another way of expressing the value judgment affirming such primacy. On the other hand, to argue for the definition that gives primacy to economic growth is no more than another way of expressing a different value judgment.

Among environmental philosophers, there has been a debate about the two different versions of sustainability, namely, the weak and the strong versions. What is at stake in

this debate is whether, or to what extent, substitution between the natural and the physical capital stock should be restricted or allowed. According to the weak version, no limitation should be imposed on substitution between the natural and the physical capital stock, since both forms of capital stock are regarded as complementary. Underlying this weak version of sustainability is the idea that as long as future generations are as well off as current generations, there should be no qualms about the substitution between the two capital stocks. The strong version, on the other hand, maintains that future generations should not only be as well off as current generations, but also should be endowed with at least a certain minimum, or even the same, level of natural capital stock. That being the case, substitution between the two forms of capital stock should not be unlimited. It is evident that the two versions of sustainability adhere to different moral positions. The weak version presupposes that future generations will not be put in a worse position in terms of the total amount of capital stock. The strong version, however, presupposes that future generations should be endowed with enough natural capital stock.

It is thus clear that the notions of sustainability used by environmental philosophers are far from neutral. Different versions of sustainability can be traced to different moral positions. Such positions may imply different sets of priorities concerning how individuals use the natural capital and, therefore, may impose different sets of constraints on their activities. In a nutshell, the conceptions of sustainability proposed in environmental disputes are morality laden. Thus, the goal of sustainability is not one that we can take for granted but one that we need to assess and argue for. In what follows, I shall discuss different approaches to applied ethics and their implications for sustainability with a view to exploring the possibility of specifying a set of globally applicable ethical principles concerning sustainability and human well-being generally.

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Biographical Sketch

Jonathan Chan is an assistant professor in the Religion and Philosophy Department and a research fellow of the Centre for Applied Ethics at Hong Kong Baptist University. He is currently an editor of the *International Journal of Chinese and Comparative Philosophy of Medicine* (formerly the *Chinese & International Philosophy of Medicine*). He has published on applied ethics, political philosophy, Chinese philosophy, and the history of logic in a Chinese context.