

Deep Sustainability and the Human Future

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Looking to the human future

Sustainability means safeguarding the human future. The chairman of the UK Government's Sustainable Development Commission, indeed, defines it as "living on the planet as if we intended to go on living here forever."¹ In what frame of mind could we rise to that challenge?

Most obviously, the prudential-managerial: within the ordinary forward mode of conscious life, we give more than ordinary attention to protecting ourselves against the ambush of the unexpected — not just anticipating particular possible threats, but deliberately trying to protect against any reasonably imaginable development.

This is essential, but it will only take us so far. Finally, as D.H. Lawrence reminds us, "you can't insure against the future, except by really believing in the best bit of you, and in the power beyond it."² It is not just that chance won't ultimately be tied down; life, in any but its simplest material domains, is radically open. To the extent that we focus on guaranteeing some future outcome, we risk disordering current living, of which the essence is growth in response to unanticipated change, and so rob ourselves of both the present and the future. This is a truth of psychological ecology directly related to Aldo Leopold's famous paradox of conservation: "too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. In wildness is the salvation of the world."³

The issues invoked here are crucially relevant, I think, to problems with our current sustainability discourse and practice, and to the possible bearing of education on these problems.

Two aspects of sustainability

In its standard current meaning, *sustainability* describes a relation between the present and future shapes of certain forms of human activity and, by extension, of the associated political and social institutions. 'Sustainable', in this sense, means, broadly, that the pattern of activities in question does not derogate from the powers of the biosphere to regenerate resources and support for its continuance at the equivalent level, or for that of acceptable successor activities. If all our relevant activities met this condition, we should be preserving into the indefinite future a level of material human welfare compatible with the biosphere's functioning as a self-sustaining system; we should be living, that is, *with the grain of nature* in a certain obvious sense.

Label this idea "bioeconomic sustainability." Can it be all we want to mean by sustainability?

A simple thought-experiment will demonstrate that it can't. Imagine that our technological inventiveness found some way of enabling us to go on enjoying all the characterizing features of present Northern civilization — the megalopolitan living, the electronic intersubjectivity, the private transport — with no derogation from the level of resources or ecosystem services available to successor generations into the foreseeable future. Now ask: Would that mean we had a sustainable society?

It is crucial to be clear what is at issue here. The prospect invoked might not in fact be so utterly far-fetched in real life — the Danish political scientist Bjorn Lomborg has recently claimed that, "in principle, covering just 2.6 per cent of the Sahara Desert with solar cells could supply our entire [energy] needs"⁴ (and perhaps we need only add to this some plausible assumptions about the potential for gene manipulation to substitute increasingly for the beneficial effects of biodiversity). But nothing is meant to turn on how defensible these claims actually are — nor is it to the point to respond that all such technological miracles performed to date have had hidden environmental costs that require us to answer the question in the negative just in virtue of the bioeconomic aspect. This is, precisely, a thought-experiment, intended to set aside disputes about likelihoods and exclude hidden costs *ex hypothesi*. We are to imagine a technological miracle that works.

Imagining it, what is the answer? I think that, for many people, it must still be, emphatically: no, that couldn't be sustainability. Something essential to the idea would be betrayed under those conditions. However long such a civilization could (at least in principle) survive materially, it would still involve humans in living fundamentally against the grain of nature — and living against the grain of nature can't, intuitively, be sustainable.

But what exactly is going against the grain here? The terms of the thought-

experiment have guaranteed that neither our means to the end of prolonging our current way of life, nor the states of affairs handed on down the generations in which that prolongation consists, derogate overall from the biosphere's regenerative powers. What we must intuit to be unsustainable can only be to do with our having that kind of thing as an end — our wanting, and going on wanting, to live thus. It is not the form taken by our actions, but something much more like the frame of our minds, that must be running counter to the grain of nature.

Take a frame of mind, in this sense, to be a loosely cohering set of dispositions to value and believe, together with tendencies to action, configured by a pattern of working values and beliefs which have sedimented, as it were, over time — amounting overall to a specific style of sense-making. At the level of a society we find various frames of mind embodied in a range of traditions, institutions, and practices: a menu of possible culturally-constituted takes on the world. Thus, at the broadest, we might distinguish the scientific from the religious frame of mind; and also the scientific, the religious, the sceptical, the technicist, the managerial with other more specific options and hyphenations. On this basis, we might say that what was still tending against the grain of nature in our thought-experiment was the techno-managerialist frame of mind itself, as displayed in the determination to adapt and substitute the natural world so thoroughgoingly, by technological means albeit bioeconomically sustainable, to subserve human preferences for the artefactual.

I call the sense in which 'sustainable' is predicable of frames of mind, and then by extension of a society in which they predominate, *deep sustainability*. What this term points to is essential to the overall sustainability concept of safeguarding the human future by living with the grain of nature. The requirements of bioeconomic and deep sustainability are severally necessary, and perhaps jointly sufficient, for this. (They are not, of course, even jointly sufficient for civilization's surviving indefinitely, for which we also need a spot of luck — not being hit by an imminent asteroid, for instance — but sustainability is a capacity, not the realization of it.) Thus bioeconomic sustainability on its own won't do (as in the thought-experiment), but nor is the right frame of mind enough — we also need to deploy our knowledge, technical skills, and intelligent persistence effectively in the light of our specific ecological situation.

What, then, warrants calling deep sustainability *deep*? For one thing, the order of concern to which it is relevant supports what are superficially bioeconomic sustainability considerations across a wide range of policy areas. We very often have to decide what to do in cases where the implications for bioeconomic sustainability are in fact quite unclear, and as our technological powers and options widen, the proportion of these cases grows — it is more and more frequently impossible to determine, albeit at our most precautionary, whether the ramifying consequences of our actions will come out bioeconomically sustainable or not. Inevitably, too, what is to count as bioeconomic sustainability will be

sensitive to the values and assumptions that we bring along to the processes of measurement and interpretation; at some key junctures, therefore, questions will be *predictively* open-ended. Our deep-sustainability intuitions play a vital, if generally unacknowledged, role in guiding us towards whatever we do decide under these conditions.

But, beyond this, there is also the logical point that *ends*, to which deep sustainability is relevant, are deeper than means, in the sense that they can (though they don't always) *justify* means. That the frames of mind from which our ends emerge go with the grain of nature gives point, as well as impetus, to the adaptation of our means to match; that we may have adapted our means to ecosystemic constraints says in itself nothing to support the human viability of the ends to which we have done so. If, indeed, we have thus adapted our means to unnatural or otherwise bad ends, that can actually make matters worse. That the society envisaged in our thought-experiment was bioeconomically sustainable might well be considered a worse thing for its sustainability overall than if it had not been — it would certainly mean that it warped and deranged human life for longer. And the practical corollary of this is also clear: concentrating firmly on bioeconomic sustainability, as we do now right across the public policy spectrum, we are quite likely to be taking as given ends which in fact jeopardize the overall likelihood of our policies' safeguarding a human future.

So deep sustainability does seem to me to deserve its adjective.

Developing deep sustainability

Developing a deep-sustainable frame of mind, most evidently in the context of education but also generally, implies that we must work with some criterion, if only invoked tacitly in practice. We must be able, it would seem, from comparing frames of mind in respect of their going more or less with the grain of nature, to get hold of some standard by which to judge of their deep sustainability — ideally a standard which we can make operative in the formation of public policy. And the whole point of such a standard is that it would have to be in some sense backed by nature. This, however, brings us immediately to a crux.

The idea that a pattern of living or a frame of mind goes against the grain of nature seems to require that it must be, at some level, what Bernard Williams aptly calls “biologically discouraged.”⁵ Now the biological realm can clearly discourage us by declining to supply or support, over time, either the means we adopt to realize our aspirations or the states of affairs in which such realization consists. The measurable bioeconomic parameters — the declining biodiversity, the increasing algae — represent, in a plain enough sense, our awareness of biology discouraging us. (On no sensible reading of the science, however social-constructionist, is it just we who are sending ourselves these signals, whatever

the issues about interpreting them.) But what could constitute biology's thus discouraging (or alternatively, of course, encouraging) a frame of mind?

Such negative or positive pressure will obviously be exerted, at a remove as it were, through whatever a particular frame of mind looks like meaning for the bioeconomic sustainability of the practices and situations through which it will most characteristically be expressed. We might sense, for instance, that a cornucopian humans-can-do-anything-and-economic-growth-will-solve-all-the-problems frame of mind, which we surely can't think of as much of a candidate for deep sustainability, was being deterred in that way. Such informed anticipation of nature's moves will always be a vital part of pondering our environmental ends.

But, as we have seen, there remains a permanent possibility that a frame of mind (for instance, the more circumspect techno-managerial) could pass this test — could encounter no such proleptic biological discouragement — and still fail, intuitively, to be deep-sustainable. Moreover, as I noted above, it is actually the more normal case that we make sustainability decisions which don't track real present or emergent biological pressures in this anticipative way, simply because we don't have any real idea what will happen. There is no ascribing the intuitions on which we then rely to a source of natural encouragement or discouragement, the absence of which is the reason we have to rely on them.

All we can actually do, in fact, is make a judgement that reflects, as far as possible, our sense of natural situatedness. We consider, for example, our naturally given needs to maintain ourselves, reproduce and nurture, and preserve our social groupings — and then set against these needs the exigencies of, say, a techno-managerial frame of mind (clear goals, detailed planning, tight control, precise audit). A good deal here just doesn't seem to fit with the inherent muddle and messiness of our involvement with emergent life, either in producing and dealing with our offspring or in our social relations — and in that way we might register something that feels like natural discouragement of that particularly characteristic modern mindset.

The problem, evidently enough, is that what we are here comparing with a frame of mind is ultimately just another frame of mind: the one, so to speak, where we are inclined to leave the human compulsion to master and direct our surroundings and circumstances out of that list of naturally given needs, rather than including it — which would give the comparison a significantly different feel. We have no access, intuitive, phenomenological, or otherwise, to an understanding of what we are naturally like, except through representations which are already the upshots of value-charged and culture-borne sense-making. To judge a frame of mind as going against the grain of nature, it seems, is no more than to be in a different frame of mind.

But doesn't that mean that what I have been calling the deep-sustainability of our mindsets is finally no more than a matter of convention — that as far as our

natural responsibilities go, we can do as we like (genetic engineering, molecular nanotechnology, terraformation of Mars and all)⁶ so long as we keep the ecology ticking over?

Making sustainable sense: the learning society

That would be a vile and heart-rending prospect. It is in the face of it that Lawrence's "really believing in the best bit of you," and its societal analogue, need to be called in aid. Really believing in the best bit of you means living by it, and the best bit of you is that aspect of your gifts and capacities, living by which makes the best sense of your life as a whole — integrates you most viably as an embodied intelligence making its particular unique way through the world. If we live thus creatively, we touch our essential wildness (the creature's living untrammelled from the full of itself), and find the sole natural guidance directly available to the will.

This may sound less disconcerting if I hasten to add that its societal analogue is education — or, at any rate, the learning society.

How so?

We are fundamentally sense-makers — we cannot take any criterion as a guide to sense-making, since the application of any criterion in judgement is itself only a matter of making sense. *A fortiori* we cannot take any naturally-endorsed criterion as a guide. But sense-making cannot be *unguided* — the idea of gratuitous sense-making, sense-making at radical liberty, itself makes no sense. The only resolution of this antinomy is in the recognition of what is entailed in our being sense-making creatures: that is, of our sense-making as an integrative living performance. I know, for instance, when my vision is in focus, without reference to any standard — for such a standard could only be some mental exemplar of sharpness of focus, and my consulting this (mentally) could carry no greater authority than my alertness to my actual field of vision. I know, rather, by directly endorsing the best integration of innumerable tacit clues from my musculature, and from subliminal impulse and anticipation — by acting, we might say, from the point where body and mind come best together in the relevant kind of alertness. This goal-directedness of being alive is what guides us as individuals in making sense, from this basic level of perception on upwards to the full construction of a habitable common world.

At this latter level, we are, of course, working across a vastly more complex field of attention, and its modes and objects have become linguistically structured so that our sense-making is inherently social and collaborative. But it is still a matter of deploying attention, as social beings, which integrates across the range of our endowment as natural beings. We make a common sense through best integrating the deliveries of our passionate and dispassionate modes of at-

tention as these are socially formed and mobilized. Our affective, imaginative, expressive, conceptual, and ratiocinative capacities and dexterities (I have space, obviously, for only the most diagrammatic account) are deployed and brought into exploratory-creative relation to one another through the interplay of all the various artistic, scientific, technological, executive, and personal forms of life that our culture affords. The central role of education in this interplay is clear — at any rate, while education still addresses itself to developing the full human capacities of creative individual sense-makers. Such sense-making is creative because we must always embark our differently gifted living selves in its provisionality, and collaboratively so because this provisionality is always conditional on the ongoing life-engagements with others which constitute a society.

The genuinely learning society is that which endorses and supports these processes of heuristic creativity. Doing so, it operationalizes our guidance by our own natures, and collectively by the conditions of our shared human nature, in sense-making. It follows that those frames of mind that emerge from the epistemic and evaluative exchange of such a society have all the natural encouragement that human representational consciousness can receive; and correspondingly, those that do not can be said to go, in a real and substantive sense, against the grain of nature. It follows further, from the whole argument of this paper, that the frames of mind on the development of which we should most immediately seize as a way of making for sustainability, are those in which we recognize, celebrate, and empower the learning society.

An example of such a frame of mind, perhaps, would be one that takes seriously the open-endedness of individual life-courses, and sits looser than modern anxiety tends to permit to the particular constructions of our identity supplied by social roles, and especially work roles. A learning society would embody such a frame of mind not just in the availability of life-long educational opportunities, but in the whole web of relations between experience, life-energy, and personal circumstance that its arrangements made possible. This is obviously much more than a matter only for the formal education system. It requires, as a minimum, that paid work follow the individual human bent in response to change and development, rather than the latter constrain and cripple such development as is very largely the case at present. An educational system configured to match would involve schooling that prepared children to find such work, and subsequent continuing learning opportunities, that enabled whole people to develop with and through their work, and to understand the full human context of it.⁷ It would quickly generate a wider context of social and corporate institutions as learning organizations, capable of collective life-intelligent responsiveness to their changing economic, cultural, and physical environments, and of exploratory-heuristic planning at all levels, with the minimum structural locking-in of inflexible goals and assumptions. This could only come about in a society which operated a form of learning democracy at all its political levels.

A learning society embodying such a frame of mind provides no guarantees for

the human future. Although the parameters of its bioeconomic sustainability would soon begin to move firmly in the right directions, it offers ultimately no more security for life on earth than our ongoing commitment to the heuristic process. But Lawrence's wisdom is to recognize that as actually the only real insurance we can have.

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Endnotes

¶ Porritt 2000

¶ Lawrence 1960

¶ Leopold 1949

¶ Lomborg 2001

¶ Williams 1995

¶ On these particular threats, see Lee, 1999.

¶ I have tried to characterize the specifically higher-educational provision of such a society in slightly more detail in Foster 2002.