

The Ethics of Hope: Values as Positive Drivers for a Sustainable Future

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ABSTRACT

With science providing largely negative, even apocalyptic, messages about the state of the planet, and the economy heading rapidly in the wrong direction, we are not motivating action, but turning off the youth. They see what is wrong, but lack alternatives to propose. With their capacity for networking and access to knowledge, they can be the drivers for societal transformation, rather than just revolution. To shorten and reduce the human impact of the inevitable transition ahead, we need to provide an ethically-based positive vision of the possible sustainable future, and a narrative on how to get there. Sustainability values can be the drivers for change. They can be founded on the multiple dimensions of human well-being, but also need to include the individual transformation from the egotistical pursuit of self-interest based on a materialistic concept of human life and purpose, to an altruistic orientation of service to others, with the happiness that comes from a virtuous life. This transformation is at the heart of all the great religions, from which traditional spiritual practices and knowledge can be drawn. This should become an essential part of education for sustainability. By getting the values right, the potential is created to evolve many diverse social and economic solutions for a sustainable low-carbon society.

Keywords: values, ethics, sustainability, education, future

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the environmental movement has been driven by a flow of bad news, from the impacts of pesticides and chemical pollution, through oil spills and industrial accidents, ozone holes and biodiversity losses, endocrine disrupters and climate change, to predictions of the collapse of civilization as we overshoot planetary limits. *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972; 2004), Jared Diamond's *Collapse* (2005) and Thomas Homer-Dixon's *The Upside of Down* (2006) all show the impermanence of our material civilization and point to imminent catastrophe. Unfortunately, bad news seldom motivates change; it is more likely to produce either denial or depression, and a disconnect from the larger reality to focus only on immediate needs or satisfactions. With the economic crisis and high rates of unemployment, especially among the young, the number of people on the margins or falling into poverty in the more industrialized countries is increasing at the same time as very rich become even richer, with widening extremes of wealth and poverty all around the world.

The youth of the world are the most immediately impacted by this combination of economic, environmental and social challenges, as their efforts to acquire an education and to join society are frustrated. Just at the time when we are reaching a peak in the number of young people, and they are better educated and more connected than ever before, society is failing them. There is even talk of a lost generation due to the economic crisis in some countries. Pressures are building, as the Arab spring, occupy Wall Street, and recent movements in Turkey and Brazil testify. Unfortunately, while the educated young feel acutely what is wrong, they do not always have a clear idea of what to put in its place, and youth revolutions are too easily captured by

other less constructive forces.

Two recent studies shed light on some of the forces at work. Peter Turchin ([2006](#), [2010](#)), applied techniques for the mathematical modelling of biological populations to modelling history. He assumed that the growth of a civilization or empire depends on social cohesion. Collecting data sets on a number of past civilizations, using as an indicator collective violence, he looked for patterns and cycles. Among other things, he found a 200 year cycle in which population growth and technological innovation create wealth that is concentrated by a wealthy elite. Eventually an oversupply of labour makes it possible to drive the workers further into poverty, but the poor do not revolt. A generation later, the young people who no longer have access to the shrinking super-rich elite become the revolutionaries, producing factionalism, anarchy and ultimately collapse, before the cycle starts over again. He predicted a risk of political instability and impending crisis in Western Europe and the USA peaking in 2020 ([Turchin 2010](#)). The only way to avoid this would be to reduce social inequality.

Jorgen Randers ([2012](#)), one of the original authors of *The Limits to Growth*, forecasts the next 40 years. He observed the natural tendency, reinforced in democratic systems and in the capitalist economy, to always choose the least-cost short-term solution. We only change when we have to, and no more than absolutely necessary, so the result is always too little, too late. Surprisingly, unlike *The Limits to Growth*, Randers does not see a collapse of civilization before 2052. We shall do enough to see population peak at 8 billion about 2040 because fertility rates drop in cities. We shall pursue GDP growth because it is the only way to create jobs and distribute wealth, but growth will slow down, only doubling by 2052, and most of that growth will be in China and the emerging economies. The rich countries are reaching the limits of productivity increases, so their growth will stop, and in the USA probably decline. More economic effort will have to go into correcting environmental damage and rebuilding after natural disasters triggered by climate change, so we shall have to work harder to stand still. The beauties of nature and undisturbed ecosystems will disappear. There will be enough resources to meet the demand but not the need, with 5 billion people still poor and a billion still starving, since nothing will be done to address extremes of wealth and poverty. Inequity in the rich world will increase, producing more social instability. The young will rebel against their elders who expect to live comfortable retirements while leaving their grandchildren to pay the price for their excesses. The market will not solve these problems, and democracy will fail to align economic and social interests. There is a brief mention of wildcards that could upset this forecast, including a financial meltdown, a revolution in the USA, and a generational rebellion. This rather pessimistic analysis is built around five central issues: capitalism leads inevitably to extremes of wealth and poverty, economic growth produces over-consumption, democracy is too slow for the changes that are necessary, intergenerational harmony will fail, and the climate will become increasingly unstable. A much better future is technically possible, requiring a shift of only 2% of labour and capital, but this is slightly more expensive, so we shall do nothing. Most worrying, while Randers stops at 2052, he sees the major impact of runaway climate change hitting soon after because we shall pass the 2°C tipping point by 2050. Disaster is just over his time horizon.

Such logical and well-founded analyses beg the question: how should we respond? Clearly Turchin and Randers are reasoning within our present materialistic value system, and project that into the future without any significant change. They do not see the possibility that the inevitable decline in our present dysfunctional system can open the way for the birth of a new global civilization founded on new values. From this perspective, the issue is whether we can turn the corner in time to avoid some of the worst of what they project. Herman Daly, one of the founders of ecological economics, concludes his reflection in Randers' book with surprise that denial has endured for forty years, and asks when we shall wake up with repentance and conversion, and if we shall have the spiritual strength and rational clarity for such a conversion. Let us assume that our youth have that capacity, and our best hope is to empower and accompany them as they use their potential for sacrificial service, innovation and collaboration to transform the system from the bottom up. This is why we need an ethics of hope.

AN ETHICS OF HOPE

Social organization can be said to rest on two pillars: reward and punishment. The latter is put to the fore by systems of laws and law enforcement, courts and prisons. Reliance on such mechanisms places a heavy cost on society. Present systems of government do not provide many incentives for good behaviour. Yet people whose moral and ethical framework gives them a strong sense of duty to the common good, a conscience that helps to determine right from wrong, and a desire to be of service, do not need a heavy system of repression to make them into good citizens, it comes naturally. While there are always some exceptional cases that make a system of law and justice necessary, most people can be educated to be self-motivated for good. Ethics are cost-effective. Ethical principles can similarly help to orient young people towards the construction of a just and sustainable civilization. An ethics of hope aims to serve that function.

There are several components that could make up an ethics of hope: a vision of a higher individual human purpose; some basic ethical or moral principles; an understanding of the forces driving change and the nature of the transformation taking place in the world; some concept of a better society worth working for, and the values required; and a recognition that certain actions such as individual behaviour and contributions to one's local community are entirely one's own responsibility. While it may seem impossible for a single person to change the world, there are always options for positive action at the local level. A religious belief can be a reinforcing factor by giving individual ethics a larger framework, as can association with a group of like-minded individuals.

A vision of a higher human purpose

The first step is to agree on a higher human purpose than just to meet material needs and wants. If we assume, as much of the world does, that humans have physical, intellectual and spiritual realities, then our purpose in life should find expression at all of these levels. We do not have to be slaves to self-interest in a consumer society that encourages greed, ego, apathy and violence, but can cultivate qualities like moderation, justice, love, reason, sacrifice and service to the common good that contribute to social progress ([BIC 2010](#)). We can then rethink the purpose of development and the goals of sustainable consumption and production, and formulate ethical principles to guide our collective actions as communities and social groups. This approach focusing on the ground rules for social organization leaves ample space for a diversity of solutions that can adapt to each environment and culture while ensuring coherence as society advances. It is not necessary to imagine a utopia, which would in any case be too limiting. Youth do not need to waste their energies revolting against the present system. They can start immediately on a small scale to experiment with the alternatives. "Ultimately, the transformation required to shift towards sustainable consumption and production will entail no less than an organic change in the structure of society itself so as to reflect fully the interdependence of the entire social body—as well as the interconnectedness with the natural world that sustains it." ([BIC 2010](#)) This in itself can be highly motivating.

Much work has gone into new thinking on the ethics that should underlie both social organization and economic behaviour. Karlberg ([2004](#)), for example, discusses the advantages of going beyond the adversarial systems of today towards mutual consultation and collaboration. Nowak ([2011](#)) has demonstrated the advantages of altruism and cooperation over competition. Beinhooker ([2006](#)) has reconsidered the whole economic system; his ethical proposals will be discussed below. Dahl ([2013b](#)) has discussed the need for a multi-level approach to values from the individual to the international levels. The moral dimensions of just and peaceful human relations include the generation of knowledge, the cultivation of trust and trustworthiness, eradication of racism and violence, promotion of art, beauty, science, and the capacity for collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts ([BIC 2010](#)).

One useful approach is to consider all the dimensions that are relevant to each individual's

personal and social development ([Dahl 2013a](#)), since justice and equity require that every human being should be considered a trust of the whole and should be given every opportunity to fulfill his or her potential in life. These include physical growth and health, security and safety, education, work, financial security, justice and fairness, human rights and freedoms, a place in the community, and a cultural and spiritual identity ([Dahl 2013a](#)).

Some basic moral or ethical principles

At the heart of an ethics of hope are some universal moral or ethical principles derived from our higher purpose and reflected in most religious and ethical traditions. These include:

- **Justice and equity** for all of humanity, as reflected in the Golden Rule and demonstrated through reciprocity and solidarity, and the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty.
- **Trust and trustworthiness**, as expressed individually in honesty and reliability. This is the foundation of contracts and work relationships, and the bulwark against corruption. It is equally important in the relationships between states. If governments cannot trust each other to respect their engagements, agreements that require shared efforts become impossible.
- **Moderation** is expressed in the golden mean, and is the foundation of sustainability. It is the excess of material civilization that is pushing us over planetary boundaries. At the individual level, if priority is given to spiritual advancement as emphasized in all the major religions, the aim should be contentment with little, meeting one's needs and not wants, and detachment from material things in favour of social relationships, cultural and scientific progress, and the cultivation of a good character.
- **Humility** is the antidote to pride and the egocentric search for power and wealth that corrupts much political and corporate leadership. It is the ideal lubricant for social relationships, and can inspire everyone to bring themselves to account each day in an effort to improve.
- A **positive outlook** reinforces hope, and makes it possible to discover the qualities in oneself and in others, ensuring freedom from prejudices. It also motivates lifelong education, and inspires confidence both in one's own advancement and in that of society.
- **Courage** is necessary because life is never easy, and there are always difficulties and challenges to be overcome. Courage makes it possible to take risks, to innovate, and to make mistakes and learn from them. If children are accustomed to hardship and do not expect an easy life, they will be able to go much further in fulfilling their potential and in contributing to society.

These are just some of the ethical principles that can make each human being a force for constructive change and social cohesion. Just as a neural network of computers, given the right instructions, can evolve the optimal solution to any problem, so can a human society in which its members are guided by these ethical standards evolve the new levels of integration in organization and governance necessary to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

The processes of change

Change is not nearly so frightening if one understands the processes of change and why it is happening. These are already well documented in biological systems, and the analogies with social systems are clear. Science and technology have transformed the human environment, eliminating all the previous barriers to human interaction and creating a single global human system within a single biospheric planetary system, and our population and resource consumption have grown to hit planetary limits. However our social systems and governance have not yet caught up, and the paradigm of the nation state has become dysfunctional, rendering us incapable of resolving global problems. Complex evolving systems show periods

of relative stability interspersed by rapid and sometimes chaotic change when new factors such as a change in scale come into play, in what is called punctuated equilibria. Species, ecosystems and civilizations advance and then decline or collapse. We are in the midst of such a period of rapid change which seems to be accelerating towards a global crisis. But times of change are also opportunities for creativity and innovation, as human society must evolve a whole new set of institutions and functional relationships at the global level. Ethics and human values should underlie the information and knowledge that code for the newly evolving systems ([Dahl 1996](#)).

This puts the turmoil of the present in a new and more constructive perspective. The young in particular can try to understand the dynamics of change in our complex systems, with the decline and collapse of outmoded institutions, and the potential of information technologies to facilitate new forms of dynamic integration. They can learn to navigate the changes ahead, keeping their ethical bearings while applying adaptive management. There is not one single solution, but many paths forward adapted to different economic, social and environmental conditions.

A better society and economy

While navigating change, it also helps to know your ultimate destination. Space does not allow a review of all the potential visions of a just and sustainable future society, whether secular ([Raskin et al. 2002](#)) or religious ([Shoghi Effendi 1938](#)), although most people have some idea of the desirable characteristics of a world that is more peaceful, just, secure and prosperous than the one they are living in. Imagining such a world and the steps one might take now in order to build it can be a significant support to a hopeful view of the world.

One important cause of the present global crises, including the extremes of wealth and poverty, the overuse of planetary resources and the destruction of the environment, is the dominant economic paradigm focused on material growth and the consumer society while accumulating financial, social and environmental debt. The transition to a sustainable society requires new value-based economic models to support a dynamic, just and thriving social order that is strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature, provides meaningful employment for all, and helps to eradicate poverty in the world ([BIC 1998](#)).

A good example of a new ethical framework for the economy can be found in the work of Beinhocker ([2006](#)). He demonstrates that the foundations of traditional economic theory in concepts of equilibrium from 19th century physics and of perfectly rational actors in the market do not hold in practice. Economies are complex evolutionary systems with a dynamic interplay of agents forming networks with emergent properties as they evolve over time. Periods of relative stability alternate with rapid changes in a punctuated equilibrium, using the market to select from an almost infinite variety of business plans those that represent a fit order at any point in time. There is a constant co-evolution of different actors, and no competitive advantage is sustainable. Wealth creation depends on the spaces available, the physical technologies, and the social technologies including institutions, laws and norms. Since the future cannot be predicted, it is important to have prepared minds and a culture of learning, rather than a fixed strategy. The ground rules of traditional economics produce the characteristic booms and busts of economic cycles, but these can be dampened by replacing competitive secrecy by consultation. Beinhocker demonstrates that real wealth is the information or knowledge that uses the flow of energy to reduce entropy in the system, increasing its carrying capacity, efficiency and complexity (see also [Dahl 1996](#)). In such non-zero-sum systems, there is an incentive to cooperate. The most significant determinant of success is the social architecture, including the behaviour of people, the structures and processes in which they operate, and the culture that emerges. This is where strong ethics provide a comparative advantage.

For Beinhocker, the traditional dichotomies of left and right, liberal and conservative, based on altruist versus self-regarding views of human nature, both exist in each of us. Our natural

tendency is to strong reciprocity: I cooperate if you cooperate, but if you cheat, I punish you. Trust is essential to build social cohesion. From this he derives rules and norms of individual behaviour that favour economic development. At the individual level, these are a strong work ethic, individual accountability, and a belief that you are the protagonist of your own life, with benefits from living a moral life in this world, being realistic about the present situation but optimistic about the future. The norms for cooperative behaviour include a belief that life is not a zero-sum game and that cooperation has benefits, that generosity and fairness have value, and that free-riding and cheating are sanctioned. Norms also need to favour innovation by valuing rational scientific explanations of the world, tolerating heresy and experimentation, supporting competition and celebrating achievement. It is important to have an ethic of investing for tomorrow, saving for future generations, sacrificing short-term pleasures for long-term gain, and enjoying high levels of cooperation. Both a strong sense of community and values, complemented by government leadership, are needed. Inequalities should be reduced to build social cohesion, and priority given to health, education and a minimum living wage for the poor to empower them for their own development. Justice and altruism can be increased through education to address the challenges of wealth distribution ([Beinhocker 2006](#)).

Being in charge

Nothing contributes more to a feeling of hopelessness than having no control over one's destiny and being swept along by unknown forces. People feel understandably helpless when confronted with climate change, financial crises, corruption, criminality and war. The energy generated by such frustration needs to be channeled into constructive action as a strong reinforcement to a hopeful attitude. First, we can each take charge of ourselves and acknowledge our responsibility for our own individual development. Showing moral courage and living by one's ethical principles are within everyone's reach, and successes at this level are mutually reinforcing. One can build a momentum for positive change.

Second, we are part of families, live in a community, and have relationships in our workplace and social networks. Again, we have considerable choice in and a significant influence over our immediate human interactions. A life based on hope can include a significant investment in improving one's family life and community, contributing to the education of the next generation, reinforcing solidarity and collective action to solve problems, taking part in meaningful discussions, and establishing spiritual ties through local devotional gatherings and worship. Progress at this level gives hope that further progress is possible.

Association

Humans are social beings, and it is normal that people who share some common values band together into associations, civil society organizations, and other groups for mutual reinforcement and collaboration. The proliferation of groups defending the values of the environment, human rights, social enterprises, organic agriculture, fair trade, gender equity, indigenous peoples, open access to information, etc. are all manifestations of the power of collective action.

The role of religion

Several aspects of religious belief can reinforce an ethics of hope. All religions emphasize a higher human purpose. Acceptance of an absolute reality beyond human experience (God, Allah, Brahma, nirvana, etc.) supports an endless drive for improvement, while cultivating love for the unknown and unknowable overcomes fear of the unknown and encourages exploration of the unknown potential in oneself, in others and in the world through science. Since it is well known that people who know that they are being watched behave better, someone who believes that God is always watching has a permanent reason for good actions. Religions also provide role models and spiritual figures who exemplify how an ideal human should behave, translating abstract ideals into something each person can relate to. Belief in an after-life where reward and punishment continue also motivates good behaviour. Many religious practices such as

meditation, prayer, fasting, charity, and study of religious texts help to overcome selfish desires and cultivate altruism. Furthermore, a religious community provides strong social reinforcement for individual efforts.

All the spiritual traditions speak of the individual transformation from the egotistical pursuit of self-interest based on a materialistic concept of human life and purpose, to an altruistic orientation of service to others, with the happiness that comes from leading a virtuous life. Some of the most relevant sources have looked at ethics and Agenda 21 ([Brown and Quiblier 1994](#)) and relate spiritual reflection and action ([Bassett et al. 2000](#)). There have been religious summits to relate faith and ecology, with statements by the different religious traditions ([Edwards and Palmer 1997](#)). Individual religions often publish texts on the environment from their perspective, such as a Baha'i focus on the environment ([Dahl 1990](#)) or more specifically on education for sustainable development ([Dahl 2012a](#)). Religious perspectives may also be incorporated into governmental initiatives, as in the measures reflecting Buddhist values behind Gross National Happiness in Bhutan ([Ura et al. 2012](#)). Even academic scholars have come to acknowledge the happiness that comes from leading a virtuous life ([Sachs 2013](#)).

Turchin ([2006](#)) saw social cohesion as arising from the constant threat of an enemy on a geographical frontier. However social cohesion has also been created by the rise of a new religion, as in the early history of Islam. This creates another kind of cultural frontier, with those sharing the new values building social cohesion as they work to transform society. A highly cohesive social and spiritual movement should be able to overcome the negative forces around it and expand into a global civilization. In addition, if its social cohesion comes not from constant external threats but from an inner spiritual force for unity in diversity, that civilization should be able to achieve sustainability in its use of resources, prevent the excessive concentration of wealth in an elite, and thus rise above the cycle of decline and fall that has characterized past civilizations, or at least slow the cycle to the millennial span of religious revelations. Such a vision should be highly motivating to young people.

HOW TO GET THERE

The immediate future does not look bright. We know that the present materialistic economic system is dysfunctional and that we need to make a transition to a new one. Researchers who have explored this transition are not optimistic that it can be done without serious crises. The question is, how much environmental damage will be done by the old system that we shall have to fix afterwards, and how much human suffering will be caused in the process? We can only hope that it will not be a long, drawn-out series of catastrophes. This may be the critical decade to start the transition, as different problems come to a head simultaneously. The challenge is to reduce the human impact.

When we look at the acceleration in global warming and climate change at the moment, and the simultaneous rush of the world economy to find ever more sources of fossil fuels to try to keep the consumer economy growing, there is every reason for despair. It seems unlikely that we shall leave 80% of the fossil fuel reserves in the ground, the only way to avoid a climate catastrophe. There is also an immediate risk of a global financial collapse ([Morgan 2013](#)). However such a collapse would seem to be the one thing (apart from a world civil war or a global pandemic), that could shut down much of the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels in time to keep global warming below 3° or 4° (most scientists think 2°C is now beyond reach because of the inertia in the system). We cannot know whether a financial crisis or accelerating climate change is the more immediate threat, or some other unsuspected disaster, but the response should be the same.

The best insurance against the freezing up of the global economy and its fallout, or any other catastrophe, will be strong community solidarity. When times get bad, people need to help each other to find solutions. Small-scale efforts in communities to build cooperation through study, reflection and action will empower people to draw on their diversity to work together. It is also

important to mobilize the energy of the youth, and to prepare children and pre-adolescents in positive ways for the challenges ahead. Providing a spiritual foundation of prayer and devotional meetings across all forms of belief can reinforce this. Such positive efforts can attract an ever-widening circle of participants and supporters acting to address problems at the neighbourhood or village level. Community building is inherently very positive and rewarding, and produces visible results. The focus on the next generation is also critical to preparing them to respond constructively to the problems they are inheriting.

The other positive approach is to learn detachment from the present system of materialism by focusing on the higher rewards at a social and spiritual level. We need to replace the superficial attractions of the consumer society by an alternative vision of a better future. If the "pull" of the new vision is strong enough, the "push" out of a collapsing material civilization will pale into insignificance. With the continuing waves of unemployment as the old system declines, there is an enormous challenge to steer that wasted human capacity in new and more constructive directions, but the best chance to do so will be at the community level, where ethical principles are immediately relevant, such as voluntary sharing, creating a village fund for social solidarity, etc. As local communities build their capacity to work together, the same approaches can be applied to wider areas of social action.

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

For children, the most important ethical education is the example of parents and of life in the family. Beyond this, some moral education in human virtues is necessary, either in the formal school system or in supplementary children's classes. The critical years are those of pre-adolescence, from 11 to 14 years old, when young people are adopting their own values, forming their personality, and deciding on their purpose and directions in life. If they can form groups that provide positive reinforcement for ethical actions and demonstrate the rewards of a life of service to others, they will acquire the foundations for a life-long ethics of hope. Often, the best people to accompany pre-adolescents in their journey are older youth, just as pre-adolescents can learn much by helping with children younger than themselves. Education that includes an ethical component has a much better chance of changing behaviour ([Dahl 2012b](#)). This is the best investment that a society can make in its own future.

Recent research has developed indicators as tools for ethical education, making values visible and providing the means to consciously cultivate them ([Podger et al. 2013](#)). By focusing on behaviours that express values, it is possible to produce indicators for respect for the environment, empowerment, appreciating unity in diversity, trustworthiness and integrity, justice and solidarity, and moderation and detachment from material things ([Dahl 2013a](#)). This can reinforce the transmission of the ethical foundations for a more sustainable and thus hopeful society.

CONCLUSIONS

At a time when many societies seem increasingly incapable of responding to the needs of their youth and of finding them productive places in their economy and community, it is important to counteract both the hopelessness of those who fall outside the system, and the stress of those struggling to stay inside it with little guarantee of any security. An ethics of hope as described here can give young people the strength not to give up, and even to find their own way forward by creating their own opportunities and alternative directions. By getting the values right, the potential is created to evolve many diverse social and economic solutions for a sustainable low-carbon society.

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