

A Multi-level Approach to Ethics, Service and Responsible Living

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ABSTRACT

From a systems perspective, it is obvious that responsible and sustainable living cannot be achieved by each of us acting alone. Individuals are part of communities that can either reinforce or impede sustainable actions. Learning the pleasure that comes from serving others in the community can provide positive reinforcement and build hope in the future. Just as an ethical approach can motivate individuals to live more responsibly and devote their lives to service to society, so it is important to unite communities around a shared vision of ethical sustainability values.

Many of today's sustainability challenges come from the irresponsible behavior of governments, businesses and other institutions, that are failing to provide a values-base for sustainable lifestyles. While governments are supposed to serve their citizens and often adopt lofty goals, the lack of ethical principles can easily lead them in other more self-serving directions. Businesses also consider too often that their ends of growth and profitability justify any means; if they are to contribute to a sustainable society and become socially and environmentally responsible, they also need to incorporate ethical principles and service to society into their institutional framework. If there is coherence between ethics and values at the individual, community and institutional levels, action at all these levels can become mutually reinforcing.

1 Introduction

Living responsibly is anything but simple. Thousands of choices may be available, but none may go in a more sustainable and responsible direction. To understand what may be responsible living for any individual, and how education may help to increase her or his level of responsibility, it can help to consider the multiple levels at which responsibility is determined, and the enabling conditions that may also need to be created for responsible and sustainable living to become a practical possibility.

Individuals exist within a set of larger contexts, each of which helps to determine what kind of a life is possible. At a social level, one is part of a family, lives in a neighbourhood, goes to a school or workplace, belongs to a culture, ethnic, and possibly a religious group, may join various associations or interest groups, takes part in sports or recreational activities, contributes to social networks, and so on. Similarly, by the simple fact of one's place of birth and residence, one has a nested set of geographic attachments to a community, a region, a country, a continent, and ultimately lives within our shared planetary system. Each individual has certain temporal linkages to an age group, a cohort or generation, a place at some stage of economic

development, and a civilization at some point in its evolution. There are also a set of intellectual contexts to which each individual belongs, such as acquiring some professional competence, being affiliated with one or more institutions through employment or membership, holding some philosophical perspective, believing in some ideology, having a religion or other belief system, etc. Some of these are fixed by birth, but most are dynamic with transitions over time. Some are obligatory, like ageing; others voluntary, such as choosing a career or spouse; and still others imposed from outside by accidents of life, economic crises, warfare and other world events. Ultimately each individual has some control over his own life, and can choose more or less responsible living within some constraints or limits.

2 The Systems Perspective

To make sense of all of this, it can help to take a systems perspective. The science of complex systems is one of the important advances of our epoch, and provides tools for understanding and dealing with complexity. A recent overview by Capra and Luisi, "*The Systems View of Life*" (2014) provides a useful guide to the field. This has conceptually gone far beyond the early computer systems models and conceptual models of the 1970s (Meadows et al. 1972, Dahl 1974). Starting with the flaws in the mechanistic world view, they review the development of systems thinking leading to the modern understanding of self-organizing systems with emergent properties and evolutionary dynamics. They explore the origins of cognition and consciousness, as well as science, religion and spirituality, and then extend the systems approach into social phenomena, organization, systems ecology, and the state of the world, before suggesting some systemic solutions to energy and climate change, agroecology and a generative economy. This puts the challenges of defining responsible living into a coherent framework.

Sustainability is fundamentally an emergent property of complex dynamic systems defined as their ability to maintain themselves as efficient functioning and evolving systems into the indefinite future. This helps to explain why sustainable development has been so difficult to pin down, since many different factors can contribute to sustainability, or precipitate unsustainability or collapse. As a system evolves over time, so do all those factors and the nature of the system itself. It is rather like the concept of "balance", with one stable point and many possible directions of instability, or "moderation" without a fixed centre but many possible forms of excess. Sustainable development is therefore a systems challenge involving a balance between ecological and economic factors over time (Dahl 1996).

Some useful examples of applied systems thinking in this context are the series of reports on "*The Limits to Growth*" (Meadows et al. 1972, 1992, 2004; Randers 2012), Eric Beinhocker's application of systems thinking to economics (2006), Tim Jackson's work as exemplified in "*Prosperity without Growth*" (2009), and Peter Turchin's work with mathematical modelling of civilizations (2006, 2010). They all illustrate how the limited assumptions of neoclassical economics lead to overshoot and collapse, and also suggest some of the systems characteristics, such as moderation, trust, and social cohesion based on justice and solidarity, that are the characteristics of sustainable human systems. We can then define responsible living more precisely as contributing to economic, social and environmental sustainability within a dynamic systems framework.

3 Ethical Approaches

Responsible living can really be only understood in an ethical context, as this is what responsibility is all about. Each of us is responsible for doing what is right to be just to others and to future generations, and to ensure that the planet we have inherited is passed on to our children and grandchildren in at least as good a condition as it was in when we received it.

From a human systems perspective, ethics, values or moral principles are the ground rules for human interactions that are at the heart of any human system. If those rules are "survival of the fittest" and "the ends justify any means", then a certain type of social organization will result,

with strength and power the characteristics selected for, and a characteristic instability that prevents very high levels of human well-being. If the favoured rules are "love thy neighbour", "turn the other cheek" and "do unto others as you would have them do unto you", then a very different form of society will evolve. Recent research suggests that the latter approach, in which competition and contest are replaced by cooperation, produces more complex and productive systems than the former ([Karlberg 2004](#); [Nowak and Highfield, 2011](#)).

As a result, ethical approaches are finding an increasing place in social discourse around sustainability, environmental responsibility and climate change. Even the very scientific Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change included experts on ethics and a chapter (3 in WGIII) on the ethical implications of its findings in its latest report ([IPCC 2014](#)), which states: "Effective decision making to limit climate change and its effects can be informed by a wide range of analytical approaches for evaluating expected risks and benefits, recognizing the importance of governance, ethical dimensions, equity, value judgments, economic assessments and diverse perceptions and responses to risk and uncertainty."

Another way to develop ethical principles for values-based education while avoiding the imposition of ethical judgements from outside is the user-driven approach used by the EU-funded research project ESDinds (education for sustainable development indicators). Each participating civil society organization was assisted to crystalize its own values as expressed in its own context, and indicators were then selected to measure these according to the group's own criteria ([Burford et al. 2012, 2013](#); [Podger et al. 2013](#); [Dahl 2013, 2014a, 2014b](#); [Harder et al. 2014](#)). This research provided the basis for the PERL values-based learning toolkits ([PERL 2014a, b, c](#)).

Eric Beinhocker ([2006](#)), as an economist and systems thinker, started with a radical reanalysis of the whole economic system from a systems perspective, and then derived ethical principles that would allow individual businesses and the economy to function more effectively. Starting with the rules and norms of individual behavior, he identified trust as essential to build social cohesion. An individual needs a strong work ethic, a sense of individual accountability, and a belief that he/she is the protagonist of his own life, with benefits from a moral life in this world, being realistic about the present situation but optimistic about the future. The norms for cooperative behavior 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 favor 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.

It has long been common to draw ethical principles and moral standards from one or more of the World's religious and spiritual traditions, which brings the advantage of adding some form of Divine authority for those within those traditions. These can be made very relevant to the issues of individual and collective responsibility under debate. Examples are the declarations at United Nations meetings by the Baha'i International Community, the religious action plans on climate change solicited in 2009 by UNDP and the Alliance on Religions and Conservation (ARC), and the Pope's planned encyclical on climate change. The potential of religion in this area is underappreciated ([Dahl 2014c](#)), and has been explored in a recent paper by Michael Karlberg, "*Religion, Meaning, and a Great Transition*" ([2014](#)). Karlberg acknowledges the widespread misuse of religion and the abuses carried out in its name, and calls for the transformation of religion itself, while emphasizing the positive role it can play. He describes a holistic and co-evolving view of the individual and society, with individual and collective well-being inextricably linked. Within this framework, normative concepts such as progress, justice, prosperity, sustainability, education, and empowerment begin to take on new meanings that reflect the needs of the age in which we live.

It is noteworthy that there is a significant area of convergence between these quite different approaches to deriving ethical principles for a responsible lifestyle. This can facilitate the introduction of ethics into the different levels of social organization.

4 The Individual

At the level of the individual, much depends on how one defines the human reality. Everyone can accept that we have a physical reality as a biological organism like any other, subject to the same environmental constraints, and most will also agree that we have an intellectual reality that is uniquely human, as reflected in abstract thought and our scientific accomplishments. More controversial is what might be referred to as our spiritual reality, transcending this physical reality and opening human development to other qualities and characteristics. While the existence of such a spiritual reality is denied by materialists and atheists, it is accepted as fundamental by religion and the great majority of the world's peoples. While an individual ethical framework can be derived from intellectual postulates about what will facilitate human evolution and social organization, it will be strongly reinforced if supported by a concept of spiritual purpose and the reinforcement of religious teachings and moral standards. Religions also bring role models of spiritual teachings put into practice.

A major issue in society today is how children acquire an ethical framework and some sense of human purpose. Traditional transmission through the family and religious instruction has diminished, leaving many young people adrift. A scientific symposium in Switzerland on "*Meaning, Values and Spirituality in the Development of Children and Young People*" in 2013 highlighted the vacuum of values in a generation whose parents rejected religion ([Centre for Social Pediatrics, 2013](#)). Yet youth want experience that will give them a values orientation. Children have a right to spirituality, and should have examples of love, and practicing values, with the possibility to learn from mistakes. The symposium documented how the consumer society is a danger for children, which naive inexperienced children cannot resist, becoming passive consumers. This must be overcome to move towards responsible living.

The human being is a social organism, and has a need for family and community. There is a social reward for following values, and breaches are sanctioned. With the decline in religion, secular ethics and the values of family and friends become most important, but are easily swept up into the consumer society. Economics and psychology assume the dominance of self-interest and consider higher values as naïve. The social pressure to conform often works against responsible consumption.

The antidote is to cultivate a spirit of service, and to allow young people to experience the pleasure that comes from altruistic actions. They need to learn creativity, doing things for themselves, and building self-confidence, creating independence, free will and responsibility. Values need to be communicated in ways that lead directly to action, so that they are not simply ideals to be acknowledged but principles to be lived every day in the family, school, workplace and community.

5 The Community

One feature of modern life has been a weakening of local communities. Increased mobility, the breakup of the extended family, immigration, the replacement of personal contact by electronic networking where proximity no longer matters, all have undermined the community as a social entity. Too often, our neighbourhood or village has become a group of people living in physical proximity, nothing more. Yet the community is the first fundamental unit for sustainable living, and the way it is structured and organized, and the services that are available, can facilitate or constrain the possibilities for individual responsibility and action. Commerce, transportation, waste management and many other parts of the human system are organized first in the community. Responsible living must be addressed collectively at the community level as well as individually.

Community building needs to become an active process. This can start simply with meaningful conversations with neighbours, friends and colleagues, and then move to informal gatherings where problems can be discussed and solutions explored, supporting a cycle of action, reflection and consultation on the next steps. This can be reinforced with moments of devotion, which can add a spiritual and ethical dimension to sharing within the community. One of the most unifying dimensions of community activity can be the education of children and youth, especially one that inculcates community values and involves the young people in acts of service. After the family, it is at the community level that the transmission of values is most important.

As communities become increasingly diverse, with populations of many cultural, ethnic and religious origins, an important focus of community building becomes finding unity in this diversity. Rapid global change will increasingly mix the populations of the world, displacing hundreds of millions of people. If these immigrants are not to be subjected to xenophobia and human rights violations, then receiving communities must be educated to see their coming not as a threat but as an opportunity, and respond accordingly. The right set of universal values can contribute to this transformation. The practice of unity in diversity at the community level is then more easily extended to other levels.

From a systems perspective, communities are simply one level of human organization nested within larger systems. There may be direct relationships with adjacent communities, and clusters of neighbourhoods often make up a larger city. Then there are higher levels of governance for the county/canton/department and state/province/region, culminating in a well-structured government at the national or federal level. More than one of these levels may have legislative powers to enshrine the collective values of the society in laws and regulations.

6 The Role of Institutions

As human social organization becomes more complex and the individuals within it more numerous, informal relationships, common understandings and traditions must give way to institutions with particular responsibilities and functions, ranging from schools to governments, religious organizations, associations of civil society and business entities. It is at this level that the translation of moral principles and ethical values into functional processes has been least successful. Too often institutions are given a narrow focus or function without any direct link or responsibility to the larger social purpose and vision of society. The result is mindless bureaucracy, predatory corporations, vested interest groups, corruption and the inefficiency of bodies working at cross-purposes.

One clear example is the modern multinational corporation. Its legal charter may only require that it generate profits for its shareholders. It can choose to incorporate itself where there are the least legal and regulatory constraints and the most fiscal advantages. It can thus largely escape from national legislation, which is generally where social and environmental responsibilities are defined in a world of sovereign nations. It depends for its ethical values on the good conscience of its managers and employees, but even the most highly motivated may find themselves trapped in institutional frameworks that force them to compromise in the purely financial interest of the corporation. It is in the very nature of the limited liability corporation that shareholders are not responsible for the often-unethical means that are used to generate their profits.

Within the larger human system, such institutions, as they become more powerful, can become highly destructive of the common good without any issue of intention. It is just in the nature of the institutions that we have created. Governments, at least those with some process of democratic accountability, are held by the public to some ethical standards, but for businesses this is only expressed as the light weight of public opinion and reputation. One of the challenges in the necessary transition to a more just and sustainable society will be to redesign such institutions so that ethical, social and environmental responsibility is built directly into their legal

charter and institutional framework, with effective systems of accountability. Each institution, then, would see its role as performing some service for the common good.

Similarly, we may need to strengthen the ethical dimension in political decision-making processes at the international, national and local levels. Decision-makers should systematically refer to moral and ethical values and spiritual principles as they consult and take decisions. Offices of ethical assessment should become as common as offices of technology or environmental assessment. Religions and other organized belief systems also need to transform themselves to become constructive partners in the transition to come ([Karlberg 2014](#)).

7 Coherence between Individual, Community and Institutional Levels

In such a complex system as the whole of human society on this planet, it may seem impossible to achieve coherence across all the multiple levels of organization. Yet systems science suggests that this is not so far beyond reach. Complex systems, given the right framework or set of instructions, can evolve their own harmonious responses. Such a framework should be basically ethical in nature, reflecting a common understanding of the society we should like to evolve.

The challenge, then, is to agree on our fundamental human purpose, and the ethical values such as justice, reciprocity, moderation, sustainability and happiness that should be the design criteria for an evolving world society. As we build these into our institutional structures, our communities and our individual value systems, they will provide the basis for coherence, as each part of the system evolves under their influence as they follow the many diverse paths towards an ever-advancing world society founded on responsible living.

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