

Christian U. Becker

Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research.

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Since the 1970s, the term “sustainability” has appeared in an increasing number of environmental, business-related, and political contexts. Its presence flags a broad concern with the conditions of a society’s endurance in general and the natural environment in particular. But as usage of the term “sustainability” has proliferated, so have doubts that it can mean anything very precise. In *Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research*, Christian U. Becker seeks to allay these doubts by showing that “sustainability” is not merely a buzzword but a coherent, albeit complex, concept.

The conception of sustainability that Becker presents has three elements. First, given the way the term is most often used in scientific contexts, “sustainability” means continuance or stability. Second, the concept has an ethical dimension, or element of orientation. Finally, the third, relational, element gives the orientational element its content. This last element is the notion of the human being as embedded in three important relations: with contemporaries, with nature, and with future generations. Bringing the three parts together, Becker defines sustainability as the “ability to establish continuance as a means for orienting human actions and life toward the threefold relatedness of human existence to contemporaries, future generations, and nature” (14). The bulk of the book is devoted to elaborating a “sustainability ethics” by reflecting on the three fundamental relations. Then the shorter final section sketches a program of “sustainability research” that will build on the book’s insights and integrate scientific and ethical perspectives.

To prepare the way for his own method of doing ethics, Becker first clears some ground. He argues that the traditional ethical frameworks of deontology and utilitarianism cannot provide an answer to the question central to sustainability ethics, “How ought one to live in regard to the sustainability relations?” (19) While these frameworks do give guidelines for relations among contemporaries, Becker argues that they fall short when they address the human-nature relation and the relation with future generations. It is not that these frameworks have nothing to say at all, and here Becker reviews utilitarianism’s treatment of higher animals and deontology’s treatment of future generations. But they are far from comprehensive or intuitive in their results. Becker is more optimistic about the resources of virtue ethics and about feminist interventions into ethics, especially care ethics. In particular, he endorses the attempt made in care ethics to introduce vulnerability, dependence, and embodiment into its model of the person, and the focus in virtue ethics on describing an ideally virtuous person. His intention is to describe a virtuous ideal relevant to sustainability, one that he calls the “sustainable person” (67).

Becker begins building this ideal by considering each of the sustainability relations in turn. He specifies the capacities needed for excellent relationships with nature, future generations, and contemporaries. Relating to nature requires “attentiveness” and “receptiveness”

(75), while relating to future generations requires responsibility, duty and care, as well as gratitude and respect (75–6). His discussion of the relationship among contemporaries focuses on relationships among global contemporaries. Here the relevant capacity is receptiveness to cultural difference.

However, Becker does not think that sustainability ethics can begin and end with a description of the excellences associated with each sustainability relation, or even with their integration through reflection. Rather, understanding the relations fully also requires examining the social structures in which they are embedded. The structural background can enable or distort the sustainability relations, and Becker argues that, as it presently exists, it is distorting. To clarify that claim, Becker employs the concept of a “meta-structure,” which he defines as “a historically evolved structure composed of four elements—(1) basic assumptions, (2) basic evaluations, (3) driving forces, and (4) institutionalization—that substantially affect societal and individual thoughts, actions, and relationships” (41). From the perspective of sustainability, Becker says, the three important meta-structures are science, technology, and economics.

Becker characterizes each meta-structure in turn. Here his discussion is extensive, but a brief summary is possible. Modern science assumes that the world can be understood perfectly and ignorance obliterated through the scientific method. Its basic evaluation is that moving in this direction represents progress for humankind. Science’s driving force comes from its basic assumptions and evaluations, as well as its institutionalization in universities and laboratories. Technology is closely related to science by the modern “Baconian ideal” (46), the vision of science and technology working together to allow humans to dominate nature. Technology’s basic evaluation is that nature is a cause of human suffering and thus is worth dominating in the name of human happiness. Economics’ basic assumption is of a particular kind of individual and systemic rationality. Its basic evaluation is that private selfishness is acceptable given the appropriate institutional background of the market and private property. Economic actors are motivated by the desire for more consumer goods. Overall, science, technology, and economics all assume that “more is better.”

Once Becker has described the meta-structures of science, technology, and economics in detail he is able to argue that each affects the sustainability relations in ways that makes it difficult for an individual to become a sustainable person. For instance, science and technology both put forth a view of nature as an object separate from humanity that human beings should dominate. This viewpoint conflicts with the open attentiveness to nature cultivated by the sustainable person. Or, again, science and economics both advocate the creation of new material (knowledge, consumer products) at the expense of the care and transmission of existing material, which distorts the sustainable person’s relationship with future generations. And, finally, economic thinking tends to colonize more and more parts of social life, which distorts the relationships among contemporaries. Thus, in order for the person to realize a virtuous ideal through her relationships with contemporaries, nature, and future generations, the meta-structures must change. Here Becker favors reform and accommodation, rather than total upheaval. An example he gives is that of fair trade, which tries to import new norms into the economic sphere.

The treatment of sustainability ethics proper thus closes with Becker's discussion of the reform of the meta-structures. The final section of the book turns to the topic of further sustainability research and how it should be carried out. Such a discipline, Becker states, should not be merely interdisciplinary—bringing together representatives of multiple disciplines—but truly transdisciplinary. That is to say, the existing disciplines that come together to form the new discipline of sustainability research must alter their methods so that they cohere, and researchers must actively engage with the non-scientific community. Becker assigns philosophy a privileged role in sustainability research as he conceives of it. It is not that the “team” should simply include a philosopher; rather, all members of the team should learn to think philosophically. In this vein, Becker discusses the virtues of a good sustainability researcher. He or she should have a well-developed capacity for reflection, for historical understanding, and for integrating concepts from conventionally distinct disciplines. Although Becker's suggestions remain formal, his vision is clearly an ambitious one. Sustainability research should foster a holistic perspective by providing a social space in which the fragments of modernity can be integrated.

Thus Becker elaborates a complex account of sustainability ethics and sustainability research. He does not cite popular texts to defend the core of these accounts; namely, the conception of sustainability that supposedly underlies the flux of uses of the term in recent discourse. However, his interpretation is a plausible one. Moreover, his integration of the individual, relational, and structural perspectives in the ethical section of the book is especially well done. Although Becker stresses the Aristotelian background of his thought, the book also obviously reflects his training as a German philosopher. His framework captures some of the richness of the German tradition, while his prose realizes the Anglo-American ideal of clarity.

The book's weaknesses are three. To a certain extent, Becker drops the first element of sustainability—continuance—from his discussion. Although he is right that continuance by itself is not an ethical concept, it may inform ethical judgments in various ways. We do not want a system we consider immoral to continue, but we might also judge lacking a system that seemed moral according to certain criteria but could last only a week. John Rawls, for instance, makes stability a criterion of principles of justice. Some discussion of these issues would have been welcome.

Second, the framework is extremely idealistic. The meta-structures and their reform are defined in terms of the ideas and values at stake. But “sustainability” as it appears in popular discourse flags a very material concern: that humanity is depleting finite natural resources. While Becker understandably seeks to replace the most vulgar conceptions of sustainability with his deeper one, this latter should integrate the popular concern about diminishing resources. And here his idealism leaves him somewhat hanging.

Finally, and perhaps tellingly, most of the book operates at a very abstract level. Since sustainability marks such pressing contemporary issues, greater space devoted to applications of the conception he develops would have been welcome. One even wonders whether the book could have been split into two separate projects: one addressing sustainability ethics with extensive applications, and a similar one addressing sustainability research with similar applications. In any case, one hopes that Becker devotes future scholarly effort to applying his

conception of sustainability, and perhaps refining that conception—through a process of “reflective equilibrium”—in the process.

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