

## Sustainability's Golden Rule

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*A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving...*

-Albert Einstein, 1931<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This essay formulates a moral principle I call *sustainability's golden rule*. This principle, I will argue, goes a long way in providing correct moral guidance for sustainable development. In laying out these ideas, the essay proceeds as follows: first, a very basic, oft-privileged definition of sustainable development is put forward; second, I make clear how sustainability's golden rule is formulable from basic moral considerations that explain why sustainable development should be pursued at all; and lastly, I deduce some of the general implications sustainability's golden rule has for sustainable development.

### The Idea of Sustainable Development

Alan Holland traces the idea of sustainability or "sustainable development" back to a report issued in 1980 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. But it was in 1987 that the World Commission on Environment and Development put forward what is widely considered the seminal text on sustainability: *Our Common Future*, also called *The Brundtland Report*. The sustainability principle argued for in the *Brundtland Report* is that pursuing development represents good policy, so long as such development is consistent with maintaining environmental

capacity (Holland, 2003, pp. 390-391). In short, *Brundtland* recommends that we ought to embrace "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (as cited in Holland, 2003, p. 391). This will also serve as this essay's operative definition of sustainability.

Consider that we share the Earth and its resources with a human population quickly approaching seven billion. There will be an estimated nine billion of us by 2050. Currently, it is within developing countries that eighty-two percent of the world's inhabitants live, and such countries are also home to the fastest growing populations (Engelman, 2010).

In these nations, development for the world's poorest ideally means more persons meeting more of their own basic needs over time, deriving, in turn, increased dignity. Development can also create a middle class from which some may even launch themselves into the stratospheres of great wealth. Indeed, with the latter two types of development in China and India, for example, more persons are behaving like the hyper-consumers of North America and Europe. We humans are expecting Earth both to provide for all the differing kinds of development and to maintain the industrialized world's quality of life *if* it can. And it is no exaggeration that this may be one of the biggest *ifs* human history has faced. Yet despite risks, such as resource despoilment and resource exhaustion, we proceed. Should we?

#### **Toward Sustainability's Golden Rule**

The idea of sustainable development captures a kind of fair treatment owed to both present and future humans. Indeed, its *prima facie* reasonableness is demonstrable by appeal to our own considered preferences. If you are reading this paper, chances are you either live in an industrialized nation or you are among the more affluent members of a developing country. The benefits of development, then, are something with which you are familiar and give you a standard of living you likely value. It is a short

rational step from admitting such valuing to the idea that it is only fair others have the opportunity to live similarly, at least when they so choose or when governments badly need development to meet citizens' basic needs. Such fairness is the stuff of moral thinking, and it flows from the impartiality requisite of any ethical worldview thought reasonable.

It is understandable, then, that humans move forward with development of some kind. Also reasonable is the idea that such development must be sustainable: it must occur in ways that allow future generations, temporally near and far, to provide for their needs too. That development should also be sustainable is arguably an additional product of the aforementioned way of moral thinking. Impartiality and fairness, that is, coupled with valuing development's benefits, also entail leaving an Earth that provides for future generations. In sum, because we have an Earth that continues satisfying many of our needs and wants (and which increasingly provides more resources for persons in developing countries), it is only fair we leave an Earth for future generations that similarly provides. This is despite our not knowing *exactly who* will be included among the Earth's population in the more distant future. It is simply a reasonable assumption that the future, comprised by whomever, will need resources in perpetuity.

If the key constraint to sustainable development imposes upon how we act, then current production and consumption must allow future generations to meet their needs also. This constraint is morally explainable, as the above demonstrates, by coupling self-referential valuing with a basic idea of fairness. Notice that morally deliberating in this manner is seemingly the stuff of golden rule thinking. That is, the logic of "Do to others as you want others to do to you"<sup>2</sup> is apparently present here, and future reasoning about ways to sustainably develop, then, is justifiable insofar as it is consistent with this logic.

Unfortunately, using the golden rule to make sense of and further guide sustainable development appears problematic. Consider a straightforward, first-person singular recasting of the

rule as applied to whether development should be sustainable: *I* (a current human) *should do* (support or reject some form of sustainable development) *to others* (future generations) *what I want others to do to me* (I want future generations to foster my well-being).

One glaring oddity is that almost all future generations are so far removed from me in space and time, no member of it can ever act toward me in any way whatsoever, let alone contribute to my well-being. There is no possibility of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup> Distant posterity, that is, will be consciously present on Earth when I am not. Thus, how can I base my current actions (i.e., what I should do to future generations) on how I want their future actions to affect me? One possible response is to conceive of future generations' actions toward me as solely consisting in remembering me either well or poorly, and this can be the basis of my deciding how to act. Applying this to the above recasting, what I want future generations to do to me (i.e., how I am remembered) will depend upon how I consumed and what kind of development I supported. If I want the future remembering me well, then I should support sustainable development, as it will leave resources for them. Isn't this workable? After all, it is quite common for persons to speak positively of leaving legacies behind and of otherwise wanting to be remembered fondly.

Of course, given whatever actions I take in supporting sustainable development, the likelihood of future generations remembering *me*, specifically, is infinitesimally small; all I can reasonably hope for is my generation and those overlapping and acting in concert with mine being remembered well and not poorly. Indeed, unless I am something like a noteworthy leader of a sustainable development movement (and even then, such a status is earned largely because others were willing to be led or influenced), my being lumped-in with a much larger group is only appropriate, given the kind of collective actions sustainable development ultimately involves if it is to be truly efficacious. Still, in this case of past generations being lauded by distant future

ones, such appreciation is never really experienced when those doing the lauding are living in the remote future and the lauded are long gone. This response does not get us away from the lack of intergenerational reciprocity that seemingly prevents us from figuring how to act appropriately using a certain understanding of the golden rule. It does, however, direct our attention to the fact that moral thinking about sustainability involves not only the well-being of whole generations on the receiving end, but that moral action on the giving end must involve large groups of right-acting persons.

Another response to the lack of interaction between certain generations is simply to argue that direct interaction, through reciprocity, is unnecessary. Instead, when figuring how to act, we need simply to imagine ourselves being in the position of future generations, where our imaginings make them the contemporaries and ourselves the members of future generations. The question becomes how we would want these future generations to act toward us if roles were reversed. If while vacationing abroad, I happen across a stranger who has just fallen and hurt herself, the golden rule need not stifle me because of the improbability of my ever benefiting from any of the woman's future actions. I can easily put myself in her position and do to her as I want her to do to me *if I were in her position*—thus, golden rule thinking could (and would) instruct me to find her first-aid. The improbability of reciprocity is actually a regular feature for many of us in our day-to-day interactions with others, and it is no surprise that some interpretations of golden rule thinking do not hinge on actual reciprocity. Instead, the emphasis is putting oneself, as they say, in the shoes of another. Thus, justifying actions that benefit future persons, even though future persons cannot directly reciprocate, is possible using golden rule thinking. Admittedly, there is an awkwardness in wording when referring to future generations as "others that can do to us." And I believe improving upon this phrasing is possible with sustainability's golden rule, but a further point needs making first.

Rejecting a golden rule aiming at reciprocity and instead embracing one urging role-reversal appears to improve golden rule thinking generally, and it helps us with intergenerational applications specifically. This switch, however, brings to the foreground an additional problem of whether present persons can adequately predict the needs of future persons. Putting myself in the place of a contemporary is one thing; placing myself in the position of someone five generations into the future is quite another.

Picture yourself as an ancestor. With only their knowledge to work with, could you, say, two hundred years ago have adequately predicted the needs and wants of persons today? Were their resources our resources? Their needs our needs? Certainly some were, among them being clean water, clean air, nutritive soil to grow food, and a hospitable environment to sustain life. So much of what we do today would be unrecognizable to them: our modes of travel, our communication technologies, how we manufacture goods, and much of the resources that make these activities possible. The changes are mind-boggling to be sure.

The above forces the following questions. What are tomorrow's resources that will satisfy their particular needs and wants? And are their needs and wants predictable to begin with? Actually, listing items such as clean water, clean air, nutritive soil to grow food, and a hospitable climate, among others, is an exceptionally good beginning to answering these questions. Zeal in listing differences between past and present generations may unreasonably de-emphasize what is still so common intergenerationally and what in all likelihood will remain so. The basics are the basics. Our doing to the future what we want them to do to us cannot ignore such basics and all that makes them possible. Still, prudence is a virtue when speculating about the future. Real differences between generations need factoring in when deciding the nature and scope of what must be set aside.

Ideal, then, is encapsulating, into a single decision procedure, the merits of all these observations about golden rule thinking as applied to sustainability. This means formulating a version of the

golden rule that features: the fairness and impartiality that is typical of golden rule thinking; actual reciprocity being a nonassumption; an emphasis on the collective benefits and burdens the rule's correct use entails (although, in practice, individuals will often need to act in isolation, though, hopefully, with institutional support); a phrasing that mitigates the awkwardness of implying future generations are actors capable of benefiting previous generations; and lastly, accommodating the fact that there will likely continue to be some intergenerational changes in what is valued. With these constraints in mind, I propose the following modifications to golden rule thinking as applied to sustainability: *We should do unto future generations what we would have had previous generations do unto ours.* This is sustainability's golden rule (hereafter abbreviated as SGR).

#### General Implications of Sustainability's Golden Rule

First and foremost, SGR anticipates future generations to be comprised of valuing beings with all that makes that possible, and so the fairness and impartiality owed to such individuals motivate the rule. It does not presuppose any reciprocity by future generations (its wording makes that clear); instead SGR urges present persons to develop in ways we would have had previous generations do for us (the use of "would have" does not mean that past generations got everything wrong, much of what they did is precisely what we *would have had them do*).

Cast in the first person plural, SGR's proper use will quickly lead to collective action. For example, it will have us organize human behavior to leave both sufficient raw materials to sustain future organic life and enhanced technologies to make this easier, but also leave institutions respectful of these goals and intellectual materials that justify these changes and situate them historically. Generally speaking, these are amongst the best of what previous generations gave us. SGR also reminds us that we are inheritors of previous generations' mistakes, ones that we should not replicate. Indeed, such successes or lack thereof help us keep in mind the limits of our predictive powers; thus,

the aforementioned caution against overconfidence in knowing all the goods of future generations is strongly implied.

Various golden rule formulations are found in different philosophies and religions throughout the world. Sustainability's golden rule has a family resemblance to many of these formulations is certainly a plus. Sustainable development is a global endeavor, and norms that guide it need cross-cultural currency. The hope here is that sustainability's golden rule can resonate with the consciences of many.

#### References

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Josiah Thompkins for suggesting this quotation from Einstein.

<sup>2</sup> This is Jeffrey Wattles (1996, p. v) approximate definition of the golden rule. His work is an excellent source for the cross-cultural use of the rule, its various formulations, and a defense of an ethic based upon it.

<sup>3</sup> The moral and political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes seemingly necessitates actual reciprocity being part of golden rule thinking. This is because Hobbes argues that human psychology is inescapably egoistic, yet he fits the golden rule within his theories accommodating such egoism.

## The Virtue of Sustainability

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This essay draws its inspiration from some of the ethical views of Aristotle. Aristotle characterizes a virtue as a mean between two extremes (which, in turn, are vices of excess or deficiency). Thus, virtue is found in moderation rather than in extremes. This notion of moderation is also evident in the *Analects* of the ancient Chinese thinker, Confucius. In this essay, I will examine how this notion of moderation may be applied to the issue of sustainability both in the context of individuals and within societies (and drawing from both traditional and modern views).

Moreover, I will examine how expanding this notion of moderation can help us avoid the polarization generated by the controversies associated with environmental issues. It seems that we are ultimately seeking a notion of sustainability that comes from a kind of moderation or balance between growth and stasis, between the local and global, between the individual and the community, between the traditional and the revolutionary, and perhaps even between the simple and the complex.

### Aristotle, Confucius, and Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics differs from an ethics based on the morality of our actions and instead focuses on issues of personal character. Thus, the focus of virtue ethics is not so much on what one should do, but rather on what sort of person one should be. Morality is then not about following rules or evaluating whether or not a given action is morally right or wrong. It is instead about being the sort of person who is disposed to do what is right.

Contemporary virtue ethics finds its origin in the moral thought of the philosopher Aristotle<sup>1</sup>. Aristotle claims that overall human happiness or flourishing (what he calls *eudaimonia*) results