

EXPLORING BASIC NORMS OF ECO-JUSTICE ETHICS

The task of ethics is to reflect critically and constructively on the why and what of moral action within a common ethos and in communities of shared interpretation. Social ethics engages plural communities of interpretation in reflecting on the moral significance of human action for justice, sustainability, compassion, and peace. Such ethical reflection, when done well, articulates a transformative vision, guiding moral norms, and supporting principles to shape decision-making, but it presents no simple choices. Melding passion of soul, personal-social purpose, and practical good sense, ethical reflection enables participants to “read” situations truthfully, to critically examine complementary and clashing moral claims that underlie policies and practices, and to evaluate probable results of particular decisions – all with the intention of overcoming eco-social injustice.

Our focus: Eco-justice ethics make an important contribution to prophetic environmentalism by articulating basic norms and supporting principles for morally coherent earth citizenship. Toward that end, this piece will concentrate on “unpacking” the substance of the four basic, interrelated eco-justice norms – solidarity, sustainability, sufficiency, and participation – that were introduced in the Brief Overview. These norms embody a vision and guide a praxis that first that becomes ever more relevant in our time.

The normative framework on which we focus here expresses the **basic value commitments of eco-justice ethics**. They encompass both ends and means – i.e., the large goal of integrating ecological health with social justice, and consistent ways to move in that direction. We are exploring a vital framework of values to guide social and environmental action at personal, institutional and government levels of moral agency.

E-J ethics seek the common human good in harmony with nature, coupling human-centered imperatives with eco-centered imperatives for earth citizenship.

Eco-justice holds on to [established] ideas of human justice, with their idealism and realism, and extends them to the realm of the nonhuman. Without letting go of the claim made by persons, eco-justice recognizes in other creatures and natural systems the claim to be respected and valued...in societal arrangements.” (Gibson 2004: 24, updating a 1982 essay)

Doing justice involves creating right relationships, social and ecological, to ensure for all members of the community of life the conditions required for their flourishing. Social justice focuses on meeting essential material and related conditions for human dignity and participation in community. Ecological justice emphasizes the importance and inherent value or “rights” of natural communities.

Today, economic deprivation and ecological degradation are linked in a vicious cycle locally and globally. We are compelled, therefore, to work for the integration of social justice and ecological integrity in ways that involve fighting poverty, assuring civil rights, seeking socio-economic equality, protecting soils, air, water and food from pollutants, preserving bio-diverse ecosystems and species, as well as acting through

nongovernmental and government agencies to foster sustainable community by advancing social and environmental rights of human beings, protecting eco-systems and ensuring fair, frugal use of natural resources.

Such social and environmental ethics, being fostered ecumenically, are informed by faith that:

- The future is open to shaping by God's action intersecting with free human choice.
- Humans have the capacity to make universal moral judgments (regarding what is good or right in common, beyond subjective, market, or cultural preferences).
- Earth's well-being now depends particularly on forward-looking human action to build just relationships with dispossessed people and the suffering community of life. (Compare Engel 1990)

Ecumenical ethics for earth community, developed from a theocentric perspective, affirm God's "ordering" and "sustaining" work throughout the natural and social ecology of life. In this spirited frame of reference we ask a basic ethical question: "What is God enabling and requiring us, as participants in patterns and processes of interdependent life, to be and do?" The general answer is: "Relate to all others in a manner appropriate to their relations to God." (Gustafson 1984: 275, 279). Informing this imperative is the recognition that God relates directly both to human beings within varied cultures and to bio-diverse creatures in their natural habitats. In our time, nature has become co-victim with the poor. Vulnerable earth and vulnerable people are being oppressed together, denying the intrinsic value of both. Particularly at the points of greatest agony and need, God hears their groaning and calls on us -- reigning earth creatures with the gift of moral consciousness (*adam* from *adama* in Genesis 2) -- to respond compassionately and justly.

Right relations originate with God's love for and covenant with earth community. And they inspire human caring for the common good of neighbor and nature. This kind of "doing has its foundation in being, in the sense of wholeness or oneness that comes from the power of God's love." (Martin-Schramm & Stivers 2003: 34-35) Humans who accept God's grace and live responsively are animated especially to foster the well-being of vulnerable earth and people.

Sin is the refusal to live this way, jeopardizing earth community. "[It is sinful] for humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation,... for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands... for humans to injure other humans with disease...for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances." (1997 Address by Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew quoted by Chryssavgis 2003: 220-21)

On what basis or "authority" can we discern what is going on and what is right and good. Contextual ethical decision-making about what is relationally appropriate draws on multiple sources of authoritative knowledge: 1) human experience with social oppression, environmental overshoot, and efforts to build sustainable community; 2) narratives and teachings from scripture as well as other sacred writings that illumine God's activity and humanity's vocation in the world; 3) empirical data and tested

scientific theories about ecological dynamics, pollution patterns, appropriate technology, etc., and 4) guiding norms of responsibility shaped by tradition critically appropriated.* Each of these “authorities” informs the preceding introduction and following tour of eco-justice norms.

[* This paragraph restates John Wesley’s “Quadrilateral” (i.e., four sources of authoritative knowledge) for our contemporary context.]

SUSTAINABILITY – the norm of stewardship

This norm fosters environmentally fitting habits of living and working that enable life to flourish indefinitely, and utilization of technologies that are ecologically and socially appropriate. Sustainability means attending to the “integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (Aldo Leopold), and to fostering the healthy functioning of social systems in their interdependence with natural systems. The norm of sustainability” modifies ‘environment’ and ‘society’ together.” (Rasmussen 1996: 171) A sustainable society melds respect for diverse life and preservation of the commons with justice for humans and otherkind right now and for the long term.

Sustainability gives very high priority to ecosystem integrity, pollution prevention, and careful, limited use of natural resources in ways that maintain Earth’s bounty while providing sufficient resources to meet basic needs of Earth’s inhabitants. Sustainability mandates production and consumption *within* ecological constraints. This ethical norm also affirms “bio-responsibility” – i.e., human responsibility to secure the “basic rights” of species and their members. (Nash 1993: 154-57) It favors moderation and stabilization of both economic and population growth to enhance the well-being of earth community over time. Moreover, this norm highlights the importance of preserving special lands and waters -- wild and managed -- to honor the biotic community’s glory.

If the above is this ethical norm’s “yes,” ever larger exponential “growth” or “yield” projected by economic developers or industrial farmers is part of the “no.” Most economic growth is still ecologically harmful. Neo-liberal economic globalization continues to undermine biological and human community, to ignore cumulative pollution from multiple sources, and to avoid meaningful “risk” assessment of impacts on habitats or people, while often failing to redress environmental injustice. The norm of sustainability pushes us to challenge shallow patterns of corporate and personal greening (now all the rage) and instead to produce, trade, consume, eat, play, travel, invest, and worship eco-justly. Commitment to sustainability shifts the burden of proof for innovations in technology, industry, and agriculture from demanding proof that innovations are harmful to demonstrating that innovations are ecologically and socially appropriate – i.e., establishing that they protect natural balances, have genuinely constructive social effects, and care for future generations.

Sustainability has major implications for the way we relate to and utilize natural resources, both renewable and nonrenewable. This norm tells us to follow policies and practices that do not damage the natural capacity of crop and range land, forests, fisheries

to renew themselves. Moreover, act to restore balances and nutrients that have been taken away, and do not demand yields beyond a level that is sustainable over the long term.

Regarding nonrenewables, sustainability requires that we curtail production of waste-generating products, and reduce drastically the world's dependence on fossil fuels. Instead, we must "shift to renewable resources if possible; use the nonrenewables as slowly as basic human needs permit, giving priority to the most important necessary uses; maximize energy efficiency; plan far ahead for the time when energy and other resources will be in short supply, so that a transition to alternatives will be underway and disruptions will be minimized; take advantage of market mechanisms to encourage efficiency in the use of resources, but do not expect markets, given their short time frame, to anticipate the future (i.e., 'discount' for it) adequately; optimize the continued recycling and reuse of minerals within the economy; shift from throwaway goods to those that are durable and repairable." (Presbyterian Eco-Justice TF, 1989: 64)

SUFFICIENCY -- the norm of distributive justice

We are concerned with justice for nature and for people -- both ecological and socio-economic justice -- and cannot set one against the other. The goal, stated succinctly, is to achieve sustainable sufficiency for all. ("All" include the world's people surrounded by myriad otherkind.) Every life form has a place in the ecological web, and must be able to obtain sufficient sustenance.

Sufficiency for all will be achieved and sustained only if the good things of God's creation are shared according to a keen sense of what is needful. A majority of the world's people needs more health and fulfillment. If sufficiency for them is to be approached in a manner that can be sustainable, sufficiency has to have another side. The already excessive demands on nature must be reduced. Those who now take too much must learn to live well on less. (*Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, 1990)

Sufficiency requires systematic sharing of resources to provide **enough** so that all, including future generations, will be able to achieve a reasonably secure life. This norm emphasizes that distributive justice is necessary to bring people in poverty up to a level of sufficiency. This norm also invites us to reconceptualize the good life, to stop squandering scarce resources, to renounce short-term cost/benefit analysis, and to insist on social policies that provide real "floors and ceilings."

Sufficiency is inextricably linked with using appropriate technology for human development, collectively observing wise limits to production and consumption, adopting social policies that redistribute resources fairly, and expecting households to live more frugally. The norm of sufficiency challenges prevailing approaches to economic "efficiency" that extract maximum possible yields and profits with little regard for biophysical limits, ecological preservation, or just sharing of finite resources.

“While other species are not equipped to practice frugality or simplicity, or to be ethical in a human sense, the norm of sufficiency does apply to humans in how they relate to other species. To care is to practice restraint” and to share Earth space. (Martin-Schramm & Stivers 2003: 41)

PARTICIPATION – the norm of participatory justice

Participation is a crucial dimension of right relationships. Social, economic, and political systems that are insufficiently participatory cannot be just. Participation means being included in the social process of obtaining, managing, and enjoying the good things of God’s creation. All members of the human family have a right to participate, as able, in this process.

As a part of wise management of the planetary household or *oikos* (which is the Greek root of economy, ecology, and ecumenism), participation demands democratic decision-making, cooperative relationships, empowerment of women and minorities, government accountability oriented to the general welfare, and caretaking responsibilities fairly shared. The objective is to express mutuality in community through relationships of freedom, equality, and accountability that enable self- and other-realization. Such qualitative democracy goes well beyond exercising majority rule.

Economic arrangements, development decisions, and environmental policies, therefore, should be shaped by and provide for effective participation by those most affected. Special efforts must also be made to give voice in decision-making to the larger community of living beings and to low-power groups of humans. If the goal is to serve the good of the ecological commons as well as the common social good in each place, then a democratic process must give explicit attention to current residents of affected places -- the people now present, other species, and future generations.

The unholy idea that democracy is bound exclusively to communally unfettered capitalism must also be challenged. Democratic ethics of cooperation, motivated by moral commitment to sustainability with equity, and respect for the community of living beings, clash with the logic of economic globalization that favors domination over solidarity, competition over cooperation, and indifference to eco-social “externalities.” Modern Western Christianity has too often accepted a mode of thought and action that overprivileges human beings (particularly the affluent) within “free market” ultra-capitalist enterprise, a pattern that continues to damage earth community.

SOLIDARITY – expressing kinship with interdependent life

Given the kinship and interdependence of all beings, this norm highlights human responsibility to respect and care for the community of life. It affirms that people everywhere are members of one household, sharing common needs and aspirations, making equal claims for basic environmental and social rights, and belonging to a larger

natural community in which the animals, plants, and eco-systems also make moral claims on us. Those who take this ethical norm seriously are people- and eco-centered, in light of their knowledge of society, nature, and God (ultimate reality). Therefore, they will seek to become signs of solidarity in the world, joining with others in fostering a renewed sense of purpose to support the oppressed and suffering and to serve the common good.

Solidarity motivates action to build just and sustainable community and to resist policies or practices that undermine it. It pushes the powerful to focus on the plight of the powerless. It is expressed on the one hand, in accountability to and alliances with disadvantaged groups of humans, and, on the other hand, in committed struggle to preserve / protect natural integrity and special places. Solidarity requires standing with “others,” and refusing to be indifferent to patterns of oppression. It is especially responsive to the plight of the poor and of vulnerable nonhuman creatures. Those who would be in solidarity will display deep appreciation for the intrinsic value of humankind and otherkind within evolving earth community, created in the image of God and loved by the Creator. “Just as God breathes life into the world (Genesis 7), humanity is given special responsibility as God’s stewards to nurture and sustain life... The virtues of humility, compassion, courage, and generosity are all marks of the norm of solidarity.” (Martin-Schramm & Stivers 2003: 44)

The observance of each norm reinforces and qualifies the others. These four interrelated ethical norms emphasize core values that should guide personal practice, institutional behavior, social analysis, and policy advocacy. They provide the moral frame of reference for hard thought and tough choices. They offer visionary as well as practical values to be embodied contextually, utilizing consistent means in specific ways that “fit” particular situations or settings. They express an emerging moral consensus about what earth community requires, and they allow for pluralistic expression that is respectful of cultural and biotic diversity.

[DTH 2010]

REFERENCES

- Chryssavgis, John. 2003. *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Cowap, Chris. 1979. “Ethical Implications of Energy Production and Use: NCCC Study Process and Purpose” in D. Hessel, ed., *Energy Ethics: A Christian Response*, New York: Friendship Press, Ch. 7.
- Engel, J. Ronald. 1990. “Introduction,” in J. R. Engel & Joan Gibb Engel eds., *Ethics of Environment and Development*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Gibson, William E. 2004. “Eco-Justice: What is it?” in William E. Gibson (ed) *Eco-Justice – The Unfinished Journey : What is it?*, Albany, NY: State University on New York Press.

Gustafson, James, 1984. *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol II: Ethics and Theology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Martin-Schramm, James B. & Robert L. Stivers, 2003. "Christian Resources for an Ethic of Ecological Justice," Ch. 2 in *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Nash, James A., 1993. "Biotic Rights and Human Ecological Responsibilities," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*

Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force, 1989. *Keeping and Healing the Creation*, Louisville, KY: General Assembly Committee on Social Witness Policy.

[To explore the biblical-theological matrix of eco-justice ethics, begin with the 1990 social policy report adopted by the 200th Presbyterian General Assembly, *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, Louisville; and the 1993 social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*, Chicago.]