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## ETHICAL ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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The concept of sustainable development in connection with environmental ethics points to the need for a change of the individualistic paradigm of neoclassical economics. The author presents the main ethical theories: utilitarianism, Kant's ethics, personalistic ethics and Jonas's ethics of responsibility from the point of applying to the problems of human interaction with the environment. It points to the need for the enriching of the paradigm of neoclassical economics with responsibility.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Thinking about the future of the human community, which is the essence of the sustainable development concept, does not fit the neoclassical concept of the enterprising man. Enterprise is traditionally considered by economics as part of the individualistic paradigm, according to which choices are made depending on personal benefits, identified with utilitarian values. Sacrificing one's interests for social interests is contemplated exclusively in terms of relinquishing short-term benefits in exchange for long-term benefits, never, however, exceeding the horizon of one generation. Economic models consider the consequences of choices made by the enterprising man without taking into account their transgenerational effects, and the so-called long term consists of short terms in which the actions of the enterprising man take place. The lack of a transgenerational perspective is also visible in the absence of constraints on individual choices other than those that can be valued by the market mechanism. The concept of sustainable development points to the need for a change or at least a modification of the individualistic paradigm of neoclassical economics. This paper aims to present the ethical aspects of sustainable development which may suggest a direction of the modification of neoclassical economics that would not be destructive to individualism in making economic choices, but which would enrich it with responsibility for making choices and action. Therefore, the paper will first deal with the options and limitations of traditional ethics and then will go on to describe the contemporary directions in ethical reflection regarding man's attitude towards the environment.

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## 2. IS THERE A NEED FOR NEW ETHICS?

Philosophers, representatives of other disciplines of learning, politicians and other persons concerned about the ecological crisis draw attention to the limitations of traditional ethics resulting from individualism and anthropocentrism (Jonas 1996). Traditional ethics focuses on the question of how people should behave towards other people. The answers to this question are variously justified, but different systems of traditional ethics share an interest in man and the premise that man's duties cannot be derived from being. Ever since D. Hume made out a case for "no ought from is" (Hume 1963), being has been regarded as free from values and thus incapable of constituting a basis for determining what is morally good and what is man's duty. Not always has traditional ethics sought a justification for man's obligations in man himself, but never in his being. It may be assumed then that this kind of ethics is anthropocentric only in the sense that man is the subject of choices, actions, and moral reflection. Traditional ethics is, however, not fully anthropocentric in the sense of making man the source of moral values. In fact, it is personalistic, because the person is the subject of morality. Anxiety about the limitations of traditional ethics must have other reasons. They were noticed by H. Jonas (Jonas 1996), who apart from anthropocentrism pointed to two other important limitations of traditional ethics:

1) the lack of interest in the nonhuman world; not only in the objective aspect in the relation to man, but also in the subjective aspect, i.e. in the relation of man to that world;

2) the lack of a temporal and spatial perspective with regard to associating particular actions with moral values; according to Jonas, all principles and norms of traditional ethics do not take into account the temporal and spatial dimension or the cumulateness of the consequences of man's actions.

Jonas explains these limitations by reference to the currently occurring change in the nature of human activity consisting in the fact that *techne* has ceased to be a means applied by people of necessity with a view to achieving close, well-defined objectives, and has become an aim in itself, man's conceited desire to have maximum control over things and constantly growing possessions. This explanation inclines one to consider seriously the widely-held opinion that the causes for the ecological crisis should be sought in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, according to which nature was created as God's gift to man. The command from Genesis: "repopulate the earth and subdue it" (*The Living Bible* 1990, Genesis 9:7) is cited as evidence of God's permission for man to exploit nature in any manner he sees fit. This tradition

is juxtaposed with the ancient Greek concept of timeless and everlasting nature, according to which man is part of nature and must be at peace with it (Meyer-Abich 1984). Consequently, representatives of ecological ethics propose that the anthropocentrism of traditional ethics be replaced with physiocentrism, and individualism with holism.

We are faced with the question, then, whether traditional ethics is incapable of solving the problem of man's obligations to the environment and whether there is a need for new, non-anthropocentric ethics. Before attempting an answer to the above questions, let us consider the issue of man's control over nature contained in God's command to subdue the Earth. Man's technological control over nature cannot be identified with violence, as has been done by the Frankfurt school (Horkheimer, Adorno 1969). The destruction of nature is connected with the Enlightenment notion of man's attitude to nature consisting in its instrumental utilization. The originator of this attitude was F. Bacon, who claimed that man could use nature for his own purposes. Subsequently Descartes postulated that man, using science and technology, should become "the lord and master of nature" (Schäfer 1995). During the industrial revolution the narrow border between control over nature, which does not destroy it but adapts it to suit man's needs, and violence against nature, consisting in a radical instrumentalization of nature and its consequent destruction, was crossed. It is this change in the character of man's actions that is emphasized by Jonas. Attempts to find in it traces of an influence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is then an exaggeration.

However, the clarification of the misunderstandings regarding man's control over nature is not equivalent to claiming that there is no need for new ethics, as both control over and violence against nature are anthropocentric in character. It must be determined whether traditional, ethical systems may be applied to justify man's obligations towards nature. To this end we will discuss three sample ethical systems: utilitarianism, Kant's ethics, and Catholic personalism.

Utilitarianism, as the ethics of consequences, advocates considering the effects of human actions. Although the originator of utilitarianism, J. Bentham, was not aware of how much destruction of nature would be caused by man, in the interpretation of his moral principle that "an action is right if it promotes the greatest good of the greatest number of people" (Bentham 1958) he took into account the duration of desirable and undesirable consequences. In economic practice and theory his principle of utility has been trivialized to the "here and now". Destruction of the environment is perceived as acceptable if it constitutes a lesser evil; for instance, the use of pesticides increases crop yields and thus does more good than harm to more people of

the present generation. In his felicific calculus Bentham postulates that not only the present but also future consequences should be taken into account. From the perspective of the influence of today's actions upon the environment in the future his system does not require any reinterpretation, although its application may be difficult as it calls for sacrifice for the benefit of future generations. Sacrificing the present generation's interests for the generations to come cannot be justified by one's own long-term benefit as was suggested by D. Hume and J.S. Mill. Utilitarianism does not answer the question why future generations' interests should be considered if they have no influence on the situation of the present generation.

Kant's ethics, as the ethics of duty, does not focus on the consequences of human actions but on their underlying reasons. An action is morally good if it derives from a good intention, irrespective of its consequences. The aspect of intention is important when assessing environmental damage, as it makes it possible to distinguish negligible and unintentional damage from serious and deliberate. The application of the *praeter intentionem* principle to side effects enables actions to be evaluated as morally good or bad. However, looking for intentions may be an unreliable criterion of evaluation in the case of actions that can affect future generations, as awareness of transgenerational obligations is difficult to achieve.

Kant's ethics is "anthropocentric" not only because of the subject of moral choices, but also due to such choices being centred on man. The second formulation of the categorical imperative reading: "act in such a way as to treat humanity always as an end, and never merely as a means" (Kant 1971) concentrates on man, whose worth requires that each action should intentionally reflect respect for people. Kant's imperative may be extended without any special problems to encompass not only people directly affected by our actions, but all people who may be influenced by them indirectly, even if they are distant in time or space. Jonas (1996) reformulated the imperative as follows: "act only in such a way that the effects of your actions may be reconciled with the continued existence of genuine human life" and "in your present-day choices among the objects of your will, take into account man's future integrity". Thus, in his formulations he includes not only intentions but also the consequences of man's actions in the infinite future. Jonas claims that his version of the categorical imperative requires a different justification for moral choices than Kant's intentionality. However, it is possible to restrict oneself to the formal criteria proposed by Kant: a given rule should become a universally binding law if it may be applied without exceptions and be accepted by all people. The necessary condition for Jonas's formulations to become a moral law is the universal consent to

comply with them and the universal understanding that environmental damage endangers the existence of humans.

Personalistic ethics invokes a transcendent justification for respect for the human being, but the justification is not necessary to derive from the concept of the human being, entitled to freedoms and rights indispensable to life in dignity, duties not only to living people but also to future generations. Deriving ethical duties from human rights leads to the question whether claims of nature itself should not be acknowledged not because of man's distant welfare but because of nature's rights. Such an attitude is represented by some proponents of ecological ethics (Regan 1983; Taylor 1986). However, it must be taken into account that nature understood as separate from man is not a subject. The relationship between man and nature is asymmetrical: man sets up objectives and achieves them through control over nature. The fact that nature constitutes a means for people does not have to deprive it of dignity; it happens only when nature is subdued and destroyed. Respecting nature does not require that rights should be assigned to it, but that the dignity of human beings, considered in the context of nature as a common good shared by the whole humanity, should be respected. The notion of a common good must be reformulated to take into account transgenerational solidarity. Consequently, we have an ethics of the present applied to a form of longer-lasting life. Such application is not easy as is attested by the controversies surrounding the protection of life in the womb.

Although the ethical systems discussed above are "anthropocentric" in Jonas's sense, this feature does not prevent them from formulating moral postulates regarding man's duties to the environment. Utilitarianism shows the need to assess the consequences of human actions, the ethics of Kant emphasizes the importance of intentions of actions in relation to others, and personalistic ethics presents communal duties ensuing from the rights of the human being. These recommendations of traditional ethics cannot be overestimated in the face of new problems connected with man's violence against nature. However, such recommendations need to be reformulated or justified more profoundly due to their "short-sightedness". It does not seem that to this end nature should be made the centre or the subject of ethical reflection and that new ethics, environmental ethics, should be created. However, a deeper justification of why man should infinitely extend the time horizon of his moral choices is required.

An attempt at such a justification is made by Jonas. His justification differs from the justifications given by traditional ethical systems, which refer to human reason and feelings or to an external authority, as it is ontological in nature. Moral good is, according to Jonas, ontologically rooted in the teleological structure of being. In contrast to representatives of traditional ethics,

who, following Hume, did not derive moral duties from being, Jonas claims that the being of humanity is a value that should be protected. On this premise he bases his argument that people have no right to commit suicide; his notion of man causes him to formulate the imperative "humanity must exist". In other words, the value of the ontological concept of man constitutes a justification for people's duties towards future generations.

Jonas's imperative has already entered the ethical canon of reflections on man's duties to the environment. Here it has been juxtaposed with selected traditional ethical systems to show that the basis for determining such duties in all ethical systems have an *a priori* character, unless they are religious in nature. It is clear in Jonas's ethics that the assumption that being has a teleological character calls for religious premises.

### 3. MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIONS AFFECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Traditional systems of ethics deal with justifying choices from the perspective of moral good, i.e. they consider the problem: "what should one do?" They do not deal with situations of moral evil, which require addressing the question: "what should someone whose action resulted in evil do?" Solving this problem requires a shift to material facts which have a concrete moral value. It is thus a problem of man's responsibility for his actions. It must be emphasized that classical solutions regarding the avoidance of negative external environmental effects refer to punishment (polluter-pays principle) or incentives (Pigou's tax), and so they concern bearing responsibility or calling a person to account for an action. They are solutions in which the agent causing environmental damage remains passive in the sense that he does not become the subject of any responsible action. The differentiation between a passive and an active attitude to responsibility for the environment is of fundamental importance to the sustainable development concept. A passive attitude means an increase in institutional restrictions imposed on actions in the form of prohibitions, orders, standards, penalties, etc., which are perceived as limitations of freedom if the rationale behind their introduction is not understood. Furthermore, today's ecological crisis offers challenges in which finding the polluter or ascribing blame and imposing obligation to repair the damage is not important (Birnbacher 1995); what counts is making people assume an active attitude involving responsible conduct. The questions to answer are: "who is responsible?" and "what does responsibility for the environment consist in?" Determining who is responsible for environmental damage is both easy and difficult. It is easy,

because responsibility rests with all people who by their choices and actions exert a destructive influence on nature and who simultaneously meet the following conditions: they are free to choose and they are aware of the consequences of their choices on the basis of the objective state of knowledge at a given moment. Such people are not only manufacturers, but also consumers, investors, scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs and politicians. Some of them do not have a direct impact on the environment, e.g. investors, although their sovereign decisions affect manufacturers' actions. Determining who is responsible for the environment is difficult because it is difficult to establish how responsibility is distributed. The opinion of Jonas and other representatives of environmental ethics – that the traditional practice of associating an action with a particular agent is not adequate to new ethical problems regarding the ecological crisis – seems legitimate. As a consequence of the lack of a direct connection between the consumers' desire to increase consumption and the threat to the existence of future generations, nobody assumes responsibility. It is essential to specify the nature of responsible actions. How difficult it is is demonstrated by the example of the "environmental" management concept (Stead 1996).

The "environmental" management concept is based on the assumption that the pursuit of environmental sustainability should be profitable to businesses. Therefore, it is proposed that managers should be made sensitive to the value of sustainability by means of five instrumental values: wholeness, posterity, smallness, quality, and community. These values should be incorporated into an enterprise's strategy in such a way so as to acquire, at the same time, economic values and the sustainability value. In other words, these values form a filter by means of which managers discover strategic opportunities and threats to their plans as regards environmental factors. For example, two environmentally sensitive competitive strategies are proposed:

- 1) a strategy of product differentiation by means of environmentally friendly product features,
- 2) a strategy of cost reduction by means of environmentally friendly actions.

The arguments for such strategies are as follows: the environment is a fundamental value, but it cannot be protected at the cost of economic values. Therefore, managers should take into account the environmental effects of their actions to the extent demanded from them by their "green" stakeholders, provided that such practice does not pose a threat to profitability.

It has to be stressed that such an “ethics pays” attitude has nothing to do with care about the environment. Managers’ “care” about the environment is a result of their interest in profits and the pressure exerted by stakeholders and not of their conscious self-imposed restrictions on operations. The values and strategies recommended to managers regard actions close to the agent. It is difficult to imagine a competitive strategy based on the slogan “Manufacturing for future generations”. In the light of the environmental management concept it is primarily consumers, investors, politicians, and scientists (that is the people whose accountability is not direct) that should be responsible for the environment.

As far as the content of responsibility is concerned, ethics suggests that people’s imagination should be stirred and skills in assessing risks connected with the use of new technologies should be acquired. It is worthwhile to point out two criteria. One criterion suggested by Jonas is the “heuristics of fear” consisting of adopting an attitude of fear of the distant and unpredictable consequences of contemporary actions. The criterion forces people to pay more attention to the risks involved than to immediate profits. It does not fit into the environmental management concept, which is based on the immediate profit-making criterion.

Similar to the heuristics of fear is the “veil of ignorance” criterion proposed by J. Rawls (1972). It tells people facing a choice to imagine that they do not know their position in the future; they do not know whether they will be talented or not, healthy or ill, rich or poor etc. It is possible to direct one’s imagination to one’s children and grandchildren, and then to consider whether one’s actions of today will constitute a sufficient premise for the existence of future generations.

Another criterion, indicated by D. Collingridge (1980), is based on the assumption that there are no faultless technologies; thus, the use of new technologies should be based on the principle of the reversibility of their effects, which means that it is necessary to adopt a pessimistic attitude to technical possibilities and to take into account the uncertainty of forecasting, and so, as with Jonas’s criterion, to stir fearful imagination.

The two criteria are mentioned here for two reasons. Firstly, the European ethics of responsibility for the environment is not widely recognized in the USA, where a strongly pragmatic application trend of business and environmental ethics predominates. Secondly, the content of accountability for the environment to future generations may be received positively only if it is sufficiently justified as to why the present generation’s activities should be restricted and directed in such a way that the environment may serve future generations. The lack of sufficient justification is a feature characteristic not



only of traditional ethics but also of environmental responsibility ethics. The most convincing justification, although not appealing to everyone, is religious. This position is supported by the content of the principle of responsibility for natural resources, known as the principle of stewardship. According to this principle, natural resources were entrusted to humanity by God (Genesis 9:7). Therefore, irrespective of property rights, in a never-ending process all people are obliged to manage the resources they were entrusted with in the interests of all humanity. The principle of stewardship refers not only to businesspeople, but to all who utilize the Earth's resources. It imposes on all users the obligation to conserve resources; for instance, consumers have to cut down on their consumption (Stackhouse 1995). The principle of stewardship may be connected with the responsibility criteria proposed by Jonas and Collingridge. It is also worth noting that the principle provides a justification for the obligations imposed on owners of resources formulated in Art. 14 of the German Constitution: "Eigentum verpflichtet...".

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

The Polish philosopher T. Kotarbiński wrote: "philosophers bid up the price to get a scarcely bearable trophy". The application of the responsible action concept, whether derived from consequentialist or deontological premises, rooted in religion or anthropocentrism, might make development sustainable on one condition: all agents must be responsible in the sense discussed above. This condition is unsatisfiable. People differ in their mental capacity and moral standards, and so sustainable development does not pose the threat of a new totalitarianism if it is not treated as a utopia. On the grounds of realism in thinking about human possibilities and limitations one has to "bid up the price" with full consciousness that the trophy will be "scarcely bearable". With this realization in mind, I have not postulated a change of the paradigm of economics, as one can talk about ethically responsible action only if the agent is free to make choices.

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