

**Bioethics Forum 2009: Sustainability
Closing Remarks (Revised)**

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Yet again, Karin has done an outstanding job bringing together an amazing group of speakers. Thanks to our speakers and discussion leaders, to Karin, to all of the staff here at BTCL, and to all of the sponsors of this year's forum, listed in your brochure, and especially, of course to BTCL and Promega for their work and support. Simply outstanding.

You've heard about sustainability from several perspectives now: scientific, historical, educational, economic, political, ecological, even architectural. But I'm a philosopher by training, and more specifically, I'm an ethicist by training. So in my closing remarks I want to draw your attention to the main ethical theme that was often just under the surface of this year's forum, bubbling up here and there. Paul Thompson mentioned it explicitly when he said that sustainability is a moral ideal. This is true, no doubt, but I want to argue for something stronger. I want to argue that sustainability is a moral requirement. It doesn't only set an ideal towards which we should strive, it sets a baseline below which we act unethically.

So, why should someone act sustainably? One common answer is that a person should act sustainably because it is in that person's own self-interest to do so. If each person has and acts on an enlightened understanding of his or her own self-interest, then that person will act sustainably because doing so is, in fact, in that individual's own best interests. Jaimie Cloud showed the cartoon of people in a boat that was sinking because of a hole in one end while two people on the other end were saying "Boy, it's good that the hole is over there," the humor arising from the fact that the two people's own interests are, of course, still undermined by the hole no matter its location in the boat. Regina Hauser, in her presentation on the Natural Step, argued that sustainable business management was profitable in the long run for those very businesses. It may well generally be true that individual self-interest and sustainability go hand in hand, but there are two problems with this self-interest approach. First, if the only relevant value underwriting someone's acting sustainably is that person's individual self-interest,

then the only criticism that we can make of someone who decides to act unsustainably is that they are being imprudent. But that doesn't carry much weight at all as a criticism (we all, even the most reflective of us, frequently act imprudently), and, more importantly, it doesn't carry any weight as a moral criticism or as a political criticism. If someone wants to squander their own resources, and if that doesn't negatively affect anyone else, then there are no grounds whatsoever for moral criticism or for political intervention. Second, it is just false that acting sustainably is always in that individual's own best interests. There are people who are doing very well, and who will continue to do very well until the day they die, making a living off of unsustainable practices. They have managed to successfully externalize the costs of their practices onto others while keeping the benefits to themselves. And it's been clear from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) reports that the burdens of global climate change are going to fall much more heavily on those who are not themselves the main emitters of greenhouse gases. The greenhouse gases are predominantly generated by the wealthier, more-developed countries, but the burdens will fall predominantly on the poorer, less-developed countries.

So while grounding sustainability in an individual's own self-interest may seem to provide it with the firmest grounding—after all, don't the economists tell us that each of us cares most about ourselves—in fact, it strips sustainability of its moral and political force, and doesn't provide reasons for the many people who stand to gain from continuing their unsustainable practices.

So, I'm going to walk you through an argument by Brian Barry, a political philosopher who works on theories of social justice, which maintains that we are morally required to act sustainably not (merely) out of our own self-interest, but rather, because it is required by the most fundamental principle of social justice, the principle of equality.ⁱ

The principle of equality can be stated very concisely: all people are fundamentally equal. This does not mean that we are all the same in some capacity or ability. The principle of equality is compatible with the obvious facts that some of us are smarter, some of us are stronger, some of us are more virtuous, some of us are shorter. The principle of equality doesn't state a factual claim, rather, it encapsulates several more specific moral principles. First, it means that the default position is that all people have equal civil and political rights. This default position can be altered, for example, we don't give the same political rights to children, but such exceptions have to be argued for. Second, the principle of equality relates to unfairness. If one person's life goes worse than another person's life, where that is not the result of different voluntary choices that those people made, then those outcomes

are unfair, and there is a prima facie case for compensating those who suffer from the worse outcomes. People who do worse because they were born into poverty, for example, made no voluntary choice about their socioeconomic status at birth and so their being worse off is unfair and society should take steps to ameliorate the bad effects of being born into poverty. Third, the principle of equality means that when they conflict, people's vital interests take precedence over what we might call "mere desires". For human beings at our particular point in history, our vital interests encompass such things as being able to live a healthy life, being educated to some minimum level, being able to raise a family, being able to work at full capacity, and being able to take part in society more generally. So if society has some resource to distribute, and there is a conflict between using that resource to satisfy someone's mere desire (Bill wants a third Ferrari) or someone else's vital interest (Bob wants to become literate), then the vital interest take precedence. To do otherwise would be to say that Bob matters so much less than Bill that Bill's totally superfluous desire is more important than Bob's vital interest.

So, the fact that all people are fundamentally equal means equal rights, avoiding unfairness, and priority for vital interests over mere desires.

Before we explore the implications of these principles for sustainability, it will be helpful to say a bit about how I am defining "sustainability". There are two key definitional questions: sustainability for whom, and sustainability of what? In terms of "sustainability for whom" the question would be whether we are focusing only on future generations of human beings, or whether we are also talking about future generations of nonhuman animals, of plants, of species, or of entire ecosystems? That is a large and worthy debate in and of itself, but I'm going to focus here on sustainability for future generations of human beings, setting aside the vital needs of nonhumans.

In terms of "sustainability of what", the question here is what has to be preserved for future generations? Is it some particular resource that has to be preserved? Not necessarily. It may be that the resource, when used up, can easily be substituted with another resource. It may be that the purpose for which that resource was used was never essential to satisfying anyone's vital needs. Sustainability needs to be understood more abstractly: what has to be preserved for future generations of people is the opportunity to live good lives.

So the principle of equality means equal rights, avoiding unfairness, and giving priority to vital needs. And sustainability means preserving the opportunity to live good lives for future generations of people. With that in mind, then, what are the implications of the principle of equality for sustainability.

First, equal rights. Well, the more unsustainably we act now, the more environmental stress we impose on future generations. And the more environmental stress we impose on future generations, the more poverty and social strife they are likely to experience, and, in turn, the less likely they are to be able and willing to accord everyone equal rights. So acting sustainably now is necessary for ensuring equal rights for future generations.

Second, avoiding unfairness. The Earth that the future generations inherit is not a function of their voluntary choices and they cannot be held responsible for the situation they find themselves in. Rather, it is a function of *our* voluntary choices. To act unsustainably now is to fail to preserve the opportunity for future generations to live good lives. So if we act unsustainably now, then their lot will be worse than ours, and that outcome is unfair. So avoiding that unfairness requires acting sustainably now.

Third, priority for vital interests. The vital interests of future generations take precedence over our “mere desires”. However the vital interests of future generations may be different from our own, they will not be able to be satisfied without adequate food, water, and air. So our using resources in an unsustainable way now to satisfy our “mere desires” will, in many ways, result in an inability of future generations to satisfy their vital needs. Such unsustainable choices, then, violate the principle of equality.

In conclusion, then, the principle of equality, the fundamental principle of social justice, means fostering equal rights, avoiding unfairness, and giving precedence to vital interests. These in turn mean acting sustainably now. So acting sustainably is not merely a matter of enlightened, individual self-interest, or of charity towards others, or of familial love for our children and for our children’s children. It is a matter of treating future generations, our political equals, in ways that conform to the fundamental principles of social justice.

I quoted Socrates in my opening remarks and the quote is so apropos that I want to repeat it: “our discussion is of no trifling matter, but on the right way to conduct our lives.” The urgency of the situation is not to be underestimated. The World Health Organization very conservatively estimates that approximately 150,000 people have already died as a result of global climate change since the year 2000. News outlets are reporting that the International Scientific Congress on Climate Change will announce in an upcoming publication that: “Recent observations confirm that, given high rates of observed emissions, the worst-case IPCC scenario trajectories (or even worse) are being realised.” The

report also concludes that “Rapid, sustained, and effective mitigation based on coordinated global and regional action is required to avoid ‘dangerous climate change’ regardless of how it is defined. Weaker targets for 2020 increase the risk of crossing tipping points and make the task of meeting 2050 targets more difficult. Delay in initiating effective mitigation actions increases significantly the long-term social and economic costs of both adaptation and mitigation.” Even if those long-term costs are going to be borne by others, our imposing those costs on them is a violation of the fundamental principle of social justice.

ⁱ Barry, Brian. 1999. “Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice.” In *Fairness and Futurity: Essays on Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice*, ed. Andrew Dobson (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 93-117.