Sustainability and the Moral Community

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ABSTRACT Three views of sustainability are juxtaposed with four views about who the members of the moral community are. These provide points of contact for understanding the moral issues in sustainability. Attention is drawn to the preferred epistemic methods of the differing factions arguing for sustainability. Criteria for defining membership in the moral community are explored; rationality and capacity for pain are rejected as consistent criteria. The criterion of having interests is shown to be most coherent for explaining why all living humans belong to the moral community. This criterion allows inclusion of future generations as well, and extends to animals and plants membership in the moral community. Inferences are drawn that food sufficiency advocates hold only presently living persons to be full-fledged members of the moral community, but that this view is internally inconsistent. Stewards should agree that all living things are members of the moral community. A distinction between welfare interests and ulterior interests allows the steward to include the aims of those who argue for sustainability as community without committing some of their errors. Community advocates argue that essential values and virtues will be lost if the culture of agriculture is transformed. I argue that community advocates may fail to pass on our most important virtue — justice — without such a transformation.

There is a broad consensus that agriculture must be transformed into a “sustainable” practice and that this is a matter of ethical responsibility. But there is little consensus on what “sustainability” means and what we ought to do to bring it about. This is partially so because what we think sustainable agriculture is depends upon whom we think count as members of the moral community. In this essay, I examine some of the reasons that have been offered for making this community a smaller or larger one. These reasons are juxtaposed with three different views of sustainability in the hope of seeing how our ideas on “who counts” relate to what we think about sustainability.

The Meanings of Sustainability

It has been widely noted that “sustainability” is an important term applied to agriculture and its practices, but that its meanings may vary with the economic, social, political, and scientific orientation of the speaker (e.g., Burkhardt, 1989; Douglass, 1984). Poincelot (1986) notes that the terms “[b]iological agriculture, conservation farming, ecological agriculture, regenerative agriculture, and sustainable agriculture have all been used, sometimes without clear definition.” (p. 9) Douglass (1984) categorizes the uses of the term “sustainable agriculture” as falling within three general classes: (1) sustainability as food sufficiency, (2) sustainability as...
stewardship, and (3) sustainability as community. Each group is held together by values held in common, which differ in relative importance from those held by the other groups. Each group is also characterized by showing a high degree of confidence in one particular methodology or epistemology: economics, ecology, and historical rationalism, respectively. From the value presuppositions of each group, we can draw some inferences about whom each group thinks of as members and nonmembers of the moral community.

Those who argue for food sufficiency see the problem of sustainability in terms of feeding a hungry population. Since the population is increasing at a dramatic rate, the solution to the sustainability problem primarily involves predicting how market forces can be used to meet the demands of the future. The first step involves assessing future demand and then assessing the capacity of agriculture to supply what people want. As Douglass (1984) points out, “the focus [is] on economic rather than physical availability of resources.” Furthermore, although it might seem sensible to advocate measures that will decrease population and therefore lower demand, these economists instead concentrate on predicting actual demand and satisfying it. There are only two ways to increase production to meet future demand: bring uncultivated land into cultivation and/or increase production per acre of already productive lands. Since much of the presently uncultivated land is of marginal quality, and because the costs of bringing any new land into production increases relative to marginal benefits, most food sufficiency advocates opt for the latter solution. In addition to a reliance on the value of economics as a predictive and problem-solving tool, these economists also exhibit a high degree of confidence in the ability of technology to solve problems in the future with equal or even greater success than in the past. They point to the tremendous increase in per acre yield that has been achieved by scientific research and development of hybrid varieties of seeds, mechanization, pest and weed control via petrochemicals as well as fertilizers and irrigation. Adherents to this view do not think we should be too concerned about maintaining a high standard of resource preservation since it is likely that technology will make up for its loss. This view has been much criticized for its reductive view of agriculture as simply a means for feeding the world and for relegating the values of culture and the environment to a secondary place (Douglass, 1984; Burkhardt, 1989). Apparently, on this view our most important responsibilities to future generations are to “leave our progeny . . . the capacity to produce . . . rather than the assurance of the sustainable resource base. . . . If at some time in the future environmental costs begin to press on the margins of agricultural sustainability [food production], it will be up to our children to make the adjustments necessary to assure sustainable production during the twenty-first century and beyond.” (Douglass, 1984, p. 10) This attitude reflects a primary concern for those who are now living and need food to survive and for those who will be born in the next generation or two. Those who are born after us have the responsibility to solve their own problems just as we have had the responsibility to solve ours. In addition, these economists often discount the interests of future generations, which means that future individuals are being accorded less than equal treatment (Peterson et al., 1989) and may be considered less than full-fledged members of the moral community.

The second group, who see agriculturalists as stewards of the land, emphasize renewal, regeneration, and preservation through an understanding of biological systems. They have been critical of the food sufficiency approach since high-tech solutions for increasing production invariably use resources, many of which are nonrenewable. Even if demand were to stabilize, we will soon deplete our oil supplies or the cost of getting the last of it will exceed its benefit, for instance. If soil is allowed to erode from efforts to constantly increase production, then eventually it will be lost and desertification will occur, as is happening in many areas of the world now. If we cut down too many forests and permit too much particulate matter and harmful gases into the air, the climate will change, making an advanced technology impossible for future generations. Proponents of the stewardship approach concentrate on understanding the interrelationships that exist in healthy ecosystems. They look for ways to equilibrate the biological systems within which agriculture is practiced so that food can be produced indefinitely without harming the underlying structures that make production possible. In their view, this means taking care to preserve and improve the quality of fertile soils and fresh water. They measure production in a way different from food-sufficiency economists, too. Whereas, the latter assess production by “total output or output per unit of scarce input in a short period of time,” stewardship advocates measure production “by the average level of output over an indefinitely long period of time” (Douglass, 1984). Adherents to this view depend on an understanding of biology and ecology to solve sustainability problems. They do not eschew technology, but wish to use it only to enhance the goals of biological sustainability. Their concerns are not only for the living and the next generation or two, but also for distantly future persons. Understanding ecosystems requires understanding all of the other organisms that live within them. Stewardship advocates often exhibit a concern for and argue for the value of nonhuman life.

The third group, who value sustainability as community, agree in general with the concerns and approach of the stewards, but claim that insufficient attention has been paid to other values that accompany agriculture as culture. They point out that agriculture has furthered traditional social values, not merely survival. Important virtues, such as self-sufficiency, simplicity, and equity have embodied the human beings who live the rural life.