2 A Global Ethic of Sustainability?
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What is implied by a global ethic if it is to provide the normative premises for sustainable development, and how sustainable is such an ethic in relation to moral opinion, nationally and internationally? This essay is an attempt to contribute an answer to this question. It takes its point of departure from the report of the World Commission for Environment and Development: Our Common Future, also called The Brundtland Report. This report provides strong recommendations for sustainable development both in OECD countries and in developing countries. But how are these recommendations substantiated? According to the interpretation that is suggested here, we can distinguish between two types of premises: the normative that concerns a global ethic, and the descriptive that concerns empirical hypotheses on the conditions for sustainable development. The normative premises involve some strong presuppositions on welfare and social justice for all humans in the present and in the future. The report hints at these normative presuppositions, but it makes no attempt to clarify them in more detail. It is a philosophical challenge to clarify what they imply, and how they can possibly be substantiated convincingly. The issue is discussed in connection with John Rawls’s theory on social justice, and a radical interpretation of it concerning international relations.

2.1 THE BRUNDTLAND REPORT AND GLOBAL ETHICS

The term ‘sustainable development’ was coined in 1980 in the World Conservation Strategy. The Brundtland Commission’s report Our Common Future of 1987 adopted this as a central term and strongly contributed to its acquiring currency in the international political debate. The Brundtland Report argues that sustainable development should be a central and major concern for political decisions, both internationally and nationally. It provides various reasons for this, some of which are strategic, with regard to the self-interests of individual states, while others regard humanity’s common welfare and social justice. At one place in the report, these moral concerns are described as a global ethic:

We have tried to show how human survival and well-being could depend on success in elevating sustainable development to a global ethic (WCED, 1987:308).
One question that can be raised in this connection is this: how does the Brundtland Report interpret the relationship between 'sustainable development' and 'global ethics'? Does it assume that the moral concerns in a global ethic are defined into the concept of sustainable development, such that it is true per definition that sustainable development involves a global ethic? Or does it assume that this is not true by definition, but rather that this is an empirical hypothesis concerning a necessary condition for the realisation of a global ethic? The report is not entirely clear on this point, and both these interpretations are possible. William M. Lafferty and Oluf Langhelle, in Chapter 1, support the former interpretation, whereas I prefer the latter.

The latter interpretation may be summarised as follows: the thesis to be justified is normative. It prescribes that political decisions should be compatible with concerns for sustainable development, both nationally and internationally. This is substantiated by two types of premises, normative and descriptive. The normative premises prescribe an overriding goal for the policy. It should be aimed at welfare and social justice for all people in the present and future. The descriptive premises clarify the empirical conditions for the realisation of this goal, for instance with regard to our consumption of natural resources, our pollution and our social organisation. Here, what is required is that processes of change in economy and society are kept within the bounds of sustainability, so that development does not undermine itself.

This provides the basis for understanding the relationship between sustainable development and global ethics. The global ethic relates to the normative assertions. These are concerned with, first of all, the general premises relating to welfare and justice, and secondly, the more special normative conclusions that can be drawn from the normative premises when these are combined with the descriptive premises. In this way, sustainable development pertains, first and foremost, to the descriptive assertions, that is, the empirical assumptions of a scientific and social type, about which conditions have to be fulfilled in order to realise welfare and justice for all people over many generations.

2.2 NORMATIVE PREMISES OF WELFARE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Let us look closer into these normative and descriptive premises. The normative premises concern welfare and social justice.

The satisfaction of human needs and aspirations is the major objective of development (WCED, 1987:43).

The report interprets 'welfare' primarily as the satisfaction of human needs, and secondarily as the satisfaction of other expectations. Here, it implies the fundamental human needs for, for example, primary goods like food,