

OPEN PEER COMMENTARY ON RANDALL CURREN & ELLEN METZGER, 'PRESERVING OPPORTUNITY: A PRÉCIS OF *LIVING WELL NOW AND IN THE FUTURE: WHY SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS*'

Living Well Now and in the Future in a Global World: Why Sustainability Principles should integrate Global Justice Concerns

DANIELLE ZWARTHOED*

*Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium.

ABSTRACT: Curren and Metzger develop a normative account of sustainability without prejudging the relationships between sustainability and global justice. This commentary propounds an alternative methodology whereby sustainability principles are determined in conjunction with principles of global justice. I suggest this methodology is better equipped to address two issues Living well raises. First, the authors' sufficiency view involves an inescapable tension between permitting a generation to consume more than the threshold of opportunities to live well and securing an equivalent threshold for other generations. Addressing this tension requires an account of how much is owed the current generation. Second, their third principle of sustainability ethics establishes a duty to "seek fair terms of cooperation conducive to sustainability". Fleshing out this principle requires an account of the fair distribution of the burdens of transitioning to a sustainable world and of the extent to which the existing distribution of goods falls short of justice.

KEY WORDS: Sustainability, Global Justice, Trade-off between Global and Intergenerational Justice, Transitional Justice

Acknowledgements: A longer version of this commentary has been presented at the APA Pacific Division Annual Meeting, at a book symposium organized by the Association for Philosophy of Education, in April 2017. I thank the organizers as well as the participants for their insightful remarks and questions. I owe a great deal of gratitude to Randall Curren and Axel Gosseries for extremely helpful and enthralling discussions on the issues tackled in this commentary. Errors and imprecisions are my own.

Correspondence Address: Danielle Zwarthoed, Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics, Place Montesquieu 3/L2.06.01, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium ; danielle.zwarthoed@uclouvain.be

Randall Curren and Ellen Metzger's book, *Living well now and in the future: Why sustainability matters*, expounds and discusses an original, inspiring and profoundly humanist approach to sustainability. The book draws on up-to-date research in an astoundingly wide range of fields without compromising rigor or content. The clear and illuminating style, combined with the sense of the urgency of the environmental crisis the authors convey, make the book accessible and captivating for both academic and non-academic audiences, which is an achievement in itself.

We can note three major differences between Curren and Metzger's account of sustainability and the well-known conception of sustainable development provided by the Brundtland report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987): first, Curren and Metzger emphasize the normative importance of preserving opportunities to live well and not just the capacity to meet needs; second, they challenge Brundtland's assumption that economic development and environmental preservation can always be reconciled; third, by contrast with Brundtland, they are not disposed to include considerations of distributive justice between contemporaries in the definition of sustainability. As they state, they aim to "develop an account of the defining normative aspect of sustainability (a form of *diachronic* justice, or justice across time) without prejudging the relationships between sustainability and *synchronic* justice, or justice with respect to a distribution of relevant goods at a given time." (p 5). Those relationships, according to the authors, would better be investigated once the definition of sustainability is settled. This commentary focuses on that aspect of Curren and Metzger's approach to sustainability. It attempts to show that such approach, by eluding the determination of the relationships between justice across generations and contemporary issues of distributive justice (and more specifically, of distributive justice at the global scale), is not consistent with other defining aspects of Curren and Metzger's ethic of sustainability.

The tension between sustainability and global justice

The first reason why the account of sustainability provided in *Living Well* should determine certain aspects of the relationship between sustainability and global justice is that the formulation of an ethic of sustainability ought not to leave the tension between the interests of the present and those of the future

unaddressed. Many failures to meet the demands of ecological and throughput sustainability are already harming those who live in areas seriously affected by environmental disasters, desertification, droughts, floods... Among those who are the most threatened by the environmental crisis figure the poorest inhabitants of the world, who live in countries whose malfunctioning institutions are unlikely to help them to cope with these disasters, and whose situation is often aggravated by armed conflicts.

The first chapter of *Living Well* identifies sustainability as a normative concept. The totality of practices of a given human society is sustainable if and only if it is compatible with the long-term stability and prospective provisioning capacity of natural systems. The language of sustainability conveys the idea that it is ethically wrong to adopt or maintain practices that undermine natural systems, insofar as these constitute the natural basis of opportunities for members of future generations to live well (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 14) and therefore provides reasons for actions in pursuit of sustainability. Importantly, Curren and Metzger contend that the normative focus of sustainability does not encompass the distribution of opportunity to live well among contemporaries as a defining condition. This does not, of course, entail sustainability precludes or prohibits such distributive concerns; it just entails it can allow itself to remain silent on these concerns.

Natural resources being finite, or renewable at a finite rate, the claims of future people on these resources are likely to compete with the claims of present people. If the core sustainability principle is well-designed, then, in a society whose institutions and practices would fully conform this principle, each generation would only receive and consume their fair share of resources, without encroaching upon other generations' fair share. But, to make sure such encroachment is not deemed morally permissible by the ethic of sustainability defended in *Living Well*, it will be argued that an idea of what a fair allocation of resources in the present is necessary.

Curren and Metzger's core sustainability principle, (preserving long-term opportunities to live well), is sufficientarian. It may be restated as follows:

Every sphere of human activity should preserve for the individuals of future generations opportunities to live well that are at least as good on average as those of individuals alive now, regardless of when they are born. (Reformulation based on Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. xix, 55, 120).

A crucial feature of sufficientarian doctrines is the establishment of a normatively relevant threshold – here, a threshold of opportunities to live well. Most versions of sufficientarianism *permit* people to get more than what is required by this critical threshold. But there is an inescapable *tension between permitting members of a generation to access more than the critical threshold and securing the very same threshold for another generation*. The principle of preservation of future generations’ sufficient opportunities to live well *compels* present humans to provide their descendants with the natural conditions of such opportunities *but also authorizes* them to bequeath more than that. This principle does not forbid present societies to sacrifice the prospects of their least advantaged members by adopting very austere policies of intergenerational savings, even if these sacrifices entail they must stay *below* the critical threshold.

Moreover, if, from a moral perspective, this threshold is so critical for future people, it has to be critical for present people as well. Curren and Metzger cannot deny it, since their ethic of sustainability is derived from a universalist and impartial ethic of respect for persons as rational beings, regardless of their time of birth (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 56-58). Hence a universalist and sufficientarian account of sustainability cannot remain silent on the demands of synchronic justice without being inconsistent. If reaching *a critical morally relevant threshold of opportunities* matters for future people, it must matter for present ones too. Therefore, the ethic of sustainability should overcome the potential inconsistency between its universalist stance and the sufficientarian implication that it is permissible to design the distribution of opportunities in such a way that future generations may get more than the threshold and thereby encroach on the present disadvantaged’s share of opportunities to live well. To address this problem, sustainability should *also* entail a synchronic, sufficientarian, principle of global justice according to which every sphere of human activity should preserve for every presently living individual sufficient opportunities to live well.

The fair distribution of the burdens of transitioning to sustainability

The second reason why the account of sustainability provided in *Living Well* should determine certain aspects of the relationship between sustainability and global justice is that the principles of sustainability ethics derived in chapter 3 actually presuppose a view of distributive justice at the global scale. Curren

and Metzger's third principle of sustainability ethics establishes a duty to "seek fair terms of cooperation conducive to sustainability". Fleshing out this principle requires an account of the fair distribution of the burdens of transitioning to a sustainable world and of the extent to which the existing distribution of goods falls short of justice. Although the authors suggest "*No theory can fully specify such terms of cooperation in advance*" (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 86), they outline rather specific requirements terms of cooperation should meet to be fair: terms of agreement that would offer citizens no prospect of living well would be unfair; allocations of nonrenewable natural capital should honor human rights and the fulfillment of eudaimonic needs. But it follows from these conditions that countries whose citizens have already secured their fair share of opportunities to live well (or more) should probably shoulder more of the burden of rendering human societies compatible with the long-term stability of ecosystems and the projected provisioning capacity of natural systems. Curren and Metzger's account of fair cooperation seems to have a principle of fair burden-sharing built in it. To phrase their stance in the language favored by climate justice scholars, they espouse a specific, neo-Aristotelian version of the ability-to-pay principle and not the beneficiary-pays principle or the polluter-pays principle. But assessing countries' respective ability to contribute to the transition towards sustainability presupposes an evaluation of how well off their inhabitants are in terms of eudaimonic needs as well as of the extent to which their circumstances fall short of justice. And one needs a view of global justice to determine which allocation of opportunities to live well is just.

References

- Curren, R., & Metzger, E. (2017). *Living Well Now and in the Future: Why Sustainability Matters* (1^{re} éd.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our common future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.