



## Doing the right thing for future generations by developing resources or opportunities? A philosophical analysis

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### Abstract

The most obvious reason for asking the question about our obligations to future generations comes from a commonly accepted perception that what we are doing today will have noticeable impacts on the quality of life available to them. Sustainability used as a yardstick and interpreted in the strict sense of resource efficiency or development, which is distributed from generation to generation, so that everyone's wellbeing is judged fair, led to different types of sustainability namely, Weak and Strong. Thus, resources that are valuable to the point of which they produce prosperity acquire different meanings. In this paper I will argue that while apparently a reasonable moral claim, and a practical way of analysis, sustainability encounters major problems and may end up inconsistent.

With reference to approaches by T. Page and B. Norton, I will argue that it is preferable to start our rationale with a concept of a just protection of fundamental opportunities and from this initial starting point support steps toward intergenerational efficiency. Moreover, by analyzing Dworkin's "problem of distributional equality" I will show that there is a difference between treating people equally, in relation to one or another commodity or opportunity, and treating them as equals.

The above approach does not imply that we have to dispose of some of the familiar analyses of the goal of sustainability as an expression of intergenerational justice, for example the obligation not to act in ways that jeopardize the capability of future generations to meet their needs. But this would suggest rethinking and expanding what counts as a point of reference for realizing that objective.

## Doing the right thing for future generations by developing resources or opportunities? A philosophical analysis

In an ever-changing world and confronted with an amalgamation of global challenges, the traditional ideals of how to live dignified, flourishing lives have changed dramatically. The underlying philosophical assumption for this paradigm shift indicated the re-evaluation of interdependence and relational entanglement between discrete forms of existence that are not connected only by spatial, time-based, or casual proximity. By adding to our vocabulary, the notion of sustainability or sustainable development, we essentially attempted to connect contemporaries, future generations, and nature in the context of a more systemic and long-term view. (Bohle, 2019)

With due hesitancy, as a non-expert, I have two observations based on the literature I have encountered. There is difficulty primarily, in constructing a generic definition of sustainability, widely accepted, unified and coherent as a reference value. Under the umbrella of the miscellaneous terms Weak & Strong we find mixed alternative paths. For example, Resourcism where various natural resources, constitute the currency by which alternative policies are evaluated, or Welfarism where a person's desires (or preferences) is the value being satisfied. Secondly, we notice issues in designing acceptable policy decision rules across a wide range of settings stemming from the alternative definitions. For example, we see different usage in utility properties, such as in the substitutability and complementarity notions and in the relationship that exists between outputs and the inputs that are used to produce them. Bryan Norton labels these models "extra-paradigmatic disagreements... where, there exists no shared conceptual basis, no shared assumptions, and no consensually accepted methodology, according to which intellectual and policy agreements can be submitted to empirical resolution." (Norton, 2004)

This ongoing debate established an enormous collection of claims, negations, scientific facts, standards, and the like. The consequence of this mixture of technical features with ethical disciplines, drives societies in different conclusions about sustainability's realizations. Different development paths based on intergenerational justice or equity are described as sustainable, survivable, or equitable, and it is clear that not all efficient allocations are at the same time just or satisfactory or even desirable. Talbot Page emphasizes that "sustainability should not be equated only with distributional justice.... It is possible to move from one sustainable but unfair allocation to another sustainable and fairer one." (Page, 1983) He mentions the example of present generation being very well off while future generations will face desolation and yet the situation could still be intergenerationally efficient in the sense that the future could not be made better off without making the present worse off.

Dworkin in order to study the inadequacy of current sustainability models in 'distributional equality' as he describes it, he mentions two schemes. 'Equality of resources' treats people as equals when resources distribution or transfer would leave their shares of the total resources equal. A second scheme, 'equality of welfare', treats people as equals when resources distribution or transfer would leave them equal in welfare. In

both schemes we face insurmountable difficulties as the abstract statement of equality of resources or welfare “leaves open the question of what counts as a resource, how to interpret welfare, how equality of resources is to be measured and how to apply the resources calculations.” ‘Equality of resources’ on one hand underplays the heterogeneity of human wellbeing as it seems to reduce the value of human ends to the resources that facilitate them. Further it cannot deal intuitively with disadvantages that are damaging but not life threatening. ‘Equality of welfare’ accordingly, literally “refuses to accept a person's own judgment about his welfare, and rather insists in establishing welfare by at least certain kinds of basic resources at his command.” At the end, it “requires that people be equal only in the designated resources” and becomes similar to ‘equality of resources’ scheme. Thus, whatever conception of resource or welfare is specified as such, aims at making people equal in something not only they might value very differently but also might change their valuation over time. (Dworkin, 2000) Overall, we have to bear in mind that people are tangible individuals with liberties and capacities, not social wellbeing customers who are assigned a certain quantity of resources by the almighty social wellbeing organizer. The core argument is not that sustainable development is an unwelcomed goal, rather, as briefly analyzed, an unfeasible one. By establishing, directly or indirectly, its principles on the informative view of natural resources, it assigns the measurement of opportunities exclusively on the dubious metric of natural resources to provide the basic guidance. This does not give sustainability’s critical concern for opportunities the autonomy to guide the moral aspect with which its principles of justice are linearly connected.

An updated attempt to deviate from the current issues, encompassing a broader but neutral vocabulary was made under the umbrella of 17 UN Sustainable Goals for 2030. The list is inspiring in many ways trying to depart from the traditional resource or capital stock-based translations; however, it still needs to consider broadly the inner conflicts and quid pro quo among dissimilar goals and take a systemic standpoint on how to cope with them. Likewise, the updated techniques of calculating, recording, benchmarking, and assessing do not seem impartial per se but tend to inscribe a particular view of the world. In sum the concept maintains a sturdy acceptance of the social value and biophysical prospect of growth but should also more broadly study the ways in which growth has negatively subsidized status quo. However, a fragmentary perception of opportunity-based view being evident, enables us to start viewing life as a mixture of several opportunities, with quality of life calculated in terms of valuable goals and choices between different ways of living. Under this remodelling, a corrected notion of sustainability is sketched, enhancing its perspectives with philosophical analysis by disclosing the numerous explanations in the sustainability statements and entrenched in a new formula by the opportunity criterion.

Along this path, Dworkin for instance, supports an ideal that focuses on opportunity and recognizes future persons as agents, not as mere recipients of what we pass on to them. (Dworkin, 2000) Similarly, Norton supporting a richer normative-moral interpretation implicit at the use of the term opportunity, proclaims that a set of behaviors should account as sustainable “if and only if their practice in a given generation will not reduce the mix of opportunities to constraints encountered in subsequent generations.” (Norton, 2014) The economist

Talbot Page interprets intergenerational equity in terms of “justice as opportunity” and his argument asserts that opportunity entitlements of the future should set constraints on today’s economic maximizing. (Page, 1983)

Opportunities approach as such focuses on human lives, not just on the resources people have, in the form of owning or utilizing objects of convenience, avoiding in Konrad Ott’s words “resource fetishism”. (Ott, 2014) This approach doesn’t even aim at the actual fulfilment of preferences or desires, descriptive of welfare status, but at the significant situations of opportunities that allow achievements. These conditions do not only denote individual capabilities and options, but over and above, more precisely physical, and societal settings, as well as cultural motives, and even environmental conditions. A favored position of the opportunities measure as described over other measures, such as natural resources, has to do with its accordance and fundamental significance, and not in any assurance of generating a complete classification of the issues at hand. By focusing on ends rather than means, the opportunities performance metrics proves more feasible than any resource as a direct utility provider. As a strategy can better manage modification adjustments amongst opportunities and resources when it comes to future generations. Last but not least opportunity perspective is able to focus independently on the other parts of the sustainability promise as described by the 17 UN Goals.

An ‘opportunity sustainable’ society - rephrasing here Talbot Page - is and should be developed in a way that is open-minded and considerate towards its social members’ preferences and their deviating understanding regarding well-being. Society as such, would be able to propose and activate a novel opportunity when acts or social failures may obstruct or deprive any future opportunity unreplaceable by other available opportunities. In this way any description of an ‘opportunity list’ will neither be definitive nor unsympathetic towards social or historical frameworks but amenable considering discourse and criticism. Thus, society will not be entangled in futile reasoning on the necessitation of different opportunities. In other words, society guarantees the opportunity to realize valuable goals rather than the actual realization of goals throughout a lifecycle. This also means that presently enjoyed levels of subsistence and comfort will be inspected closely and thoroughly in terms of their usurpation of substantial conditions of opportunities for a future meaningful life. In toto, the novelty of the “opportunisation” vs “utilization” approach, as I label it, is that it does not perceive opportunities as the objective concern but focuses on the process that transforms any utility into one of opportunity. As such, natural resources are no longer simply and plainly material substances. Their materiality incessantly reflects the anatomy and trajectory of the society. Therefore, although I do believe opportunities approach to be the pillar in successfully addressing sustainability issues, I have to confess that by saying that I have simply outlined a new agenda for further study, a study looking well beyond the limited confines of this paper.

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