To Be or Not to Be Sustainable: the Care Ethics of the Environment vs. the Tragedy of the Commons

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Brîndu?a Palade

Palade Brîndu?a[1]
[1] National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (NUPSA), Bucharest (ROMANIA)

Abstract
Over the last few decades, a decisive paradigm shift has taken place from a care ethics concerned with vulnerable humans and animals to a more global ethical movement aimed at protecting the ecosystems and the planet. One may argue that this movement has been encouraged by scientific warnings regarding the potentially catastrophic impact of current trends in global warming; and by the far-reaching explorations of extraterrestrial space, which have helped scientists understand the singular conditions for life that are apparently provided by the Earth’s protective atmosphere and liquid water. Another shift has occurred in the self-understanding of many individuals, especially in the West, from privileged beings that regard themselves as the center of the world (anthropocentrism) to ethical beings that are responsible toward other species and the environment upon which humanity depends. At the same time, however, the environment is often subject to the well-known tragedy of the commons. As a result, in large areas the responsibility for its protection is still avoided by some economic agents and particular individuals. Many even prefer to rationalize an environmentally aggressive behavior, notably in the United States. This article is meant to review these opposing forces and to inquire into the possibility of finding “an Archimedean point” from which we could impartially assess the sustainability dilemma, which can also help us tackle the environmental challenges of the future.

1. Care ethics and the environment
Rights-based, deontological and utilitarian ethics are built either upon rationalistic and individualistic presuppositions, or upon impartiality and equality [1]. By contrast, the care ethics that has emerged in the
late 20th century, especially through the writings of feminist philosophers like Carol Gilligan [2] and Nel Noddings [3], is a relational ethics motivated by partial emotions toward beings who are dependent or vulnerable. Care ethics follows to some extent in the tradition of the sentimentalist ethics whose main classic theorist is the empiricist philosopher David Hume [4]. Although Gilligan has later attempted to harmonize care with justice, she has never abandoned the idea that there is “a different voice” based on moral intuitions and “sentiments”, rather than rule-bound or consequentialist rationalizations. Whether or not we see this voice as “feminine” (we may prefer a more gender-neutral approach, since it allows us a broader moral application of human emotions such as empathy and compassion, and it avoids essentialisms) it clearly provides the ground for an ethical theory that is less competitive and hierarchical than the classic normative theories: deontological and social contract-based ethics, on the one hand, and consequentialist and utilitarian ethics, on the other hand. Some philosophers, like Charles Taylor for example [5], have even argued that most Western modern thinking about morality, as well as the political tradition of liberalism, bears the mark of an individualism that tends to omit obligations towards communitarian goals. The relational model of human agency that is presupposed by the ethics of care provides a clear contrast to this atomistic mindset. On the other hand, if an ethics of care may balance the standard Western individualistic approach to ethics by highlighting the need to protect vulnerable beings, in some non-Western societies shaped according to more communitarian values it is precisely the neglect of individual rights that may sometimes account for abuses of power and corruption. An ethics of care that values social networks but is deprived of a right-based notion of justice that applies to each and every individual may easily lead to favouritism, nepotism, and discrimination. Carol Gilligan’s seminal theorizing of care ethics did not pay attention to vulnerable animals, being more concerned with dependent humans. Nel Noddings, on the other hand, has added to the ethics of care the moral obligation of humans to care for proximate animals, although only if they are open to caring completion and are capable of reciprocity (a stray cat that shows up at one’s door is preferable, according to her views, to a rat that does the same). Noddings rejects Peter Singer’s assertion that it is specialist to prefer humans over animals, or that one is under the moral obligation to become a vegetarian – otherwise, any care for animals would be meaningless [3, pp. 157]. According to Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan [6], a feminist care ethic is preferable to a deontological defence of animal rights, since, instead of purely formal and abstract moral rules, it provides a moral foundation based on a relational ontology to the human obligations toward animals. This kind of moral foundation acknowledges the value of love, compassion, and empathy in strengthening the connection between humans and animals. In recent decades, the applications of the ethics of care have extended to the provision of environmental security to the next generations. In other words, care ethics has expanded its object from the protection of vulnerable humans and animals to the conservation of ecosystems or even the planet as a whole, which is the home which will be inherited by the coming generations. A global environmental ethics, which takes into account the interdependence of various organisms and ecosystems while emphasizing the virtue of “caring” for these networks as a moral agent embedded in them, rather than as a solitary and detached rational individual, has nowadays gained a wider audience than in the past. Given the environmental challenges of our time, especially the degradation of local ecosystems and the climate change, the emerging care ethics of the environment is expected to become a mainstream branch of applied ethics. The care ethics of the environment is not to be understood as a paternalistic way of “caring for” or
“protecting” the weakened environment [7], but rather as an extension of care ethics from particular beings and organisms to ecosystems and global networks in which the agent is inserted. This global extension was “paradoxically” encouraged by the more far-reaching recent scientific explorations of extra-terrestrial space, which have so far revealed the singular conditions for life provided by our planet. Indeed, the Earth’s magnetosphere, its atmosphere, and liquid water create an environment that is more hospitable to life than the one that was discovered on planets which are located not only in our solar system (since the Earth seems currently the only habitable planet in our solar system, occupying the “Goldilocks” zone), but also in our galaxy and beyond. Even if the scientific exploration of exoplanets that are similar to Earth has only recently begun, it is safe to say that so far, no reachable Earth-like planet, which provides similar conditions for life, has been identified. So, protecting the global network and ecosystems on the home-planet Earth seems a vital concern for the present and the future generations of “Earthlings”.

2. Caring for vulnerable species that benefit the ecosystems

The conventional approach to environmental ethics is either rights-based and individualistic or holistic and utilitarian. The rights-based approach emphasizes the right of individual organisms and species to life, whereas the holistic one focuses on safeguarding the ecosystems. Once again, by highlighting the interconnection between organisms through a network of living beings, the care ethics approach provides a more balanced perspective, which can motivate both the protection of particular species and the preservation of ecosystems, especially if they are endangered.

Vulnerable species have prima facie right to be cared for. Yet, the actions taken by various animal activists and organizations to protect some of them are not motivated only by abstract and rational considerations about the relevance of their survival for the planet’s biodiversity, but also by emotions such as compassion and empathy with their struggles to survive. Such compassion is not necessarily directed at the species itself but can also regard the ecosystems or the human beings, since, in the long run, there are sound reasons to believe the species extinction will affect humanity’s well-being as well. Even in the case of endangered species that seem inconsequential or unattractive to human beings, the conservationists’ projects to save them is in most cases justified by the fact that those species help ecosystems in more or less subtle ways, or by their interdependence with other species that eventually directly affect humans.

Let us take for example the vultures population. Once these populations declined in some countries, as was the case in India with the dramatic decrease of Gyps vultures in the 1990s due to the presence of the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac in many animal carcasses (which killed the vultures who ate them), the populations of rats and feral dogs increased, bringing about many transmissible diseases, some of which could be lethal. With regard to many ecosystems, vultures are seen as “Nature’s Custodians of Cleanliness” through their disposal of carcasses of dead animals, both wild and domestic. The cultural derision of vultures as predatory and greedy animals is not supported by scientific data that show their huge positive impact on ecosystems.

So, in this case, the care for local ecosystems and human well-being has motivated the care for a particular endangered species, i.e. a programme of vulture protection led by the Bombay Natural History Society*. Once we understand the interrelation between endangered species and ecosystems, we can also grasp the importance of caring for particular species because of “holistic” reasons related to ecosystems whose degradation can ultimately impact human well-being.

The same argument goes for the protection of top predators like wolves, which are known to make ecosystems more diverse. Indeed, the aim of saving and increasing the wolf’s population in some areas is to a larger extend motivated by the care for ecosystems than by the care for this particular species.
Although wolves are majestic and beautiful animals, their preservation is not primarily prompted by aesthetical reasons or by their intrinsic value. For instance, in the Glacier National Park, Montana, USA, the benefit of having many resident gray wolves has been studied for years. This research showed that a significant number of predatory wolves generate “trophic cascades”**. The result is a decreased number of coyotes, a less destructive impact of the elk (since the gray wolf is the leading predator of elk), better soil, better habitat for trout, and more song birds. Consequently, a healthy ecosystem is apparently promoted through preserving a wolf’s population in certain wild areas. Caring for the survival of wolves means in the long run caring for the ecosystems.

3. The fragility of the planet Earth and the responsibility to protect its environment
The most significant impact upon many astronauts who travel in spaceships around the Earth and beyond is, reportedly, not the encounter of the vast universe of which planet Earth is but an infinitesimal part. The pattern that has emerged after many decades of space travelling is that, regardless of differences in nationality, gender, or worldviews, astronauts report an increased awareness of the location of the Earth itself in space. This change of perception has been termed by Frank White, a space journal author who has interviewed many astronauts and cosmonauts, the “Overview Effect” [8]. According to White, this phenomenon consists of “a cognitive shift in awareness” due to “the experience of seeing firsthand the reality that the Earth is in space” [8, pp. 100]. Such experience is described by many astronauts as more vivid and vision-changing than any intellectual understanding of the interconnectedness of everything on the Earth. The Overview Effect, that is the experience that the Earth is a planet, often has a strong emotional impact upon astronauts who come to perceive that “the Earth is a whole system” [8, pp. 99].
A corollary to this experience is that many astronauts perceive the fragile condition of the Earth. The Earth’s atmosphere comes to be seen from space in all its thinness and frailty. This radical change of perspective seems to announce a move in the cultural consciousness from the perception of the Earth that was basically shaped on the ground, that is the perception of a stable planet provided with limitless resources, to a more dynamic view of a planet regarded as a natural “spaceship” with limited resources, of which human beings are the only responsible party.
Since everything is interconnected on a planet that moves through space, it is clear that the Overview Effect promotes the unity of humankind and their vital responsibility to safeguard resources and preserve the ecosystems. A care ethics of the environment seems very much in tune with this view of human interconnectedness. In addition, this perspective clearly encourages a sustainable economic activity especially through an increasing use of renewable energy, recycling, and ethical consumer choices. Likewise, it encourages a human responsibility that moves away from a traditional “anthropocentrist” worldview, according to which human beings, as “center of the Universe”, were entitled to use freely the resources of the world. On the contrary, the idea of a fragile planet requires a care-based approach which supposes that humans are responsible for the continuation of life on this planet.
4. The tragedy of the commons
Sustainability is often jeopardized, however, by what is called “the tragedy of the commons”, a notion coined by Garett Hardin in an article published in 1968 [9]. It means that when something, like the global atmosphere that surrounds the planet, is not owned privately, but collectively, nobody feels particularly responsible for its preservation. If one needs to exploit a resource that is collectively owned, he or she would feel entitled to do that, usually without planning to replace it. For example, if one needs wood from a neighbouring forest that is owned by the commons in order to keep one’s home warm in the winter, he or
she will gather the wood from the forest without thinking to plant other trees instead. And if everyone does the same, sooner or later the forest would entirely disappear, while nobody would call the attention to the need to start a reforestation project. Once we realize that the Earth too belongs to everyone, we can understand that its environment is inescapably subject to the tragedy of the commons. If everyone feels entitled to take raw materials from it, even if their action is unsustainable, in the end, the resource is depleted and all the players are worse off.

Garett Harding also points out the fallacy of the classic invisible hand theory advanced by Adam Smith, according to which individuals who act in their own self-interest in free markets will actually benefit the public interest. Of course, Smith never considered the hypothesis of a finite planet with limited resources when he proclaimed the rather “mystical principle of the «invisible hand»”, an “unguarded conclusion” of a theory that seems to authorize that each individual pursues his or her selfish good [10]. In reality, the rational maximizing behaviour of individuals on a free market aims at a tragic failure in a limited world, given the overuse of resources. In Hardin’s own words: “Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a common brings ruin to all.” [9, pp. 1245]

So, without a strategic use and reuse of resources, and a plan to continuously renew them, the tragedy of the commons seems unavoidable. A factor that also appears to accelerate the risk of global resource depletion is the overall population growth. The obvious reason for this concern is that the planet cannot support an indefinite number of people that would consume its finite resources. The resource consumption is not equal around the planet. For instance, an average middle-class American usually consumes 3.3 times the subsistence level of food and about 250 times the subsistence level of clean water. Consequently, if everyone on Earth would consume like a middle-class American, the planet could not possibly support more than 2 billion people. Whether irrationally or not, the main advocates against environmental awareness and action against climate change come nowadays from rich and prosperous conservative Americans and from the party that currently dominates the American political stage, the GOP.

Another issue is the growing urbanization and centralization that occurs in many parts of the world. There is a global tendency for people to move to cities for better employment and opportunity. Together with the raised standard of living, this creates many environmental problems, since this movement usually signifies additional cars, heaters, and waste, which increase pollution. This issue is especially sensitive in developing countries that have less environmental regulations. For example, the most dangerous air according to the data from the World Health Organization*** is in some cities in Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Cameroon, China, and Pakistan. According to the World Bank projections, the tendency of the urban population to grow, while the rural population to either remain the same or decrease, will continue over the next decades. By 2045, the world’s urban population is expected to increase by 1.5 times to 6 billion, and 70 out of 100 people of the world are expected to live in cities****. This means that the global population that does not produce food through agriculture and has a larger carbon footprint is expected to grow, while the rural population that is involved in agriculture, is less energy-consuming, and less harmful to the environment, will shrink or stay the same.

Sustainable projects for the future urbanization and centralization thus seem to be a dire necessity.

5. Another veil of ignorance: how could caring agents choose sustainability?

The risk to the planet’s resources and the environment underlined by the “tragedy of the commons” raises
the question of how to effectively implement projects that promote sustainability. How to convince people who currently inhabit the planet to switch from an egotistic consumption of resources to more sustainable habits? I will propose here a Rawlsian-like strategy of finding an “Archimedean point” through a mental experiment that is in some respects similar to Rawls’s “veil of ignorance” [11], while replacing the potential concern of an individual for him- or herself with the care for other beings.

So, what if the people and the animals that an individual care for would be mentally moved on the same planet Earth at some point in the future, when the planet could possibly be depleted of natural resources and of its protective atmosphere? How would this individual use the current resources given the prospect that his or her loved ones and his or her pet(s) would struggle to survive on a resourceless planet, whose air would no longer be breathable? In order to increase this individual’s awareness of this prospective crisis, we should add that the particular circumstances about the ability of his loved ones to survive in such harsh conditions are not known to him, and they could be the lowest. In other words, they could be amongst the most disadvantaged people on a future resourceless planet. If a colony on another planet (let us say, Mars) would be established by then, they could not afford to pay for the travel to that extraterrestrial home. If some people would be able to survive even on Earth in capsules provided with oxygen and due to the ability to cultivate plants in small greenhouses and to filter water, the people this individual cares for could be among those who do not have access to such rare resources. In other words, this individual would be emotionally constrained to think of how the well-being of these people is jeopardized by his current unsustainable habits. He would be constrained to choose such sustainable measures that would guarantee that even the worst off and the less capable to survive in a competition for scarce resources could still have enough drinkable water, food, and oxygen in the air to keep living on a future planet Earth.

Such a mental experiment is aimed at creating the conditions for environmental justice motivated by the responsibility and care for those human beings and animals that are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Instead of thinking of such beings in the abstract, the experiment proposes to regard them as close friends or relatives – or, in the case of animals, as cherished pets – who could be among the most affected by the environmental degradation of the Earth. So, it proposes to use a relational motivation in order to sustain an environmentally responsible behavior and ecological justice between generations.

Instead of a Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” that would ensure the impartiality and fairness of the parties to an agreement, we assume a hypothetical situation in which the motivation to judge and act fairly is care-bound, rather than purely rational, in the Kantian-Rawlsian moral sense. The parties would be thus motivated to secure the well-being of future generations of the planet Earth’s inhabitants by their propensity to care for those beings who are the most dependent on them, such as their children or their pets. The similarity with the Rawlsian experiment is that in both cases the parties are deprived of some knowledge of particular facts, although in our case, the veil of ignorance is not of themselves, but of others. In this mental experiment, their loved ones could find it hard to outlive in a future in which the planet is depleted of its vital resources. The only thing that they know about their loved ones is that they could be among the most vulnerable, who may not survive a competition for very limited resources. Their vulnerability is a necessary precondition, as it were, in order to attract the agent’s sympathy and care, which is predicated upon his or her close personal ties to those people and animals.

The outcome of such an altered “veil of ignorance” is not to establish a procedure by which one may choose some principles of justice, as in Rawls’ theory of justice. The aim is to find “an Archimedean point” from which one can assess the sustainability dilemma that I described so far in this article: on the one hand,
the need for sustainable economics is more evident than ever, and on the other hand the tragedy of the commons leads to an increasing overuse of the planet’s limited resources. The resulting agreement, which is not based on “the rationality of the parties”, as in Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* [11, pp. 123], is that all parties would be induced by care-bound motives, or, in classic Humean terms, by their “moral sentiments”, to consider the kind of planet that the future generations will inherit.

The idea is that parties may adhere to more sustainable ways of living by reducing unnecessary consumption, as well as by recycling, reselling and donating items, saving water, conserving energy and choosing renewable sources, eating local and organic food, purchasing fair-trade products, and a variety of actions aimed at the protection of ecosystems. They may choose to follow the norms of environmental justice as caring agents, rather than as rational parties to an agreement. Of course, one could also conceive of a Rawlsian kind of agreement according to which parties would be ignorant about their own particular circumstances, if they were to live in the future on the same planet. In this case, they would rationally seek to secure their own well-being even if they were among the most disadvantaged. But I find more compelling and realistic the notion of an agreement motivated by care, whose real object is the well-being of future generations, than an individualistic-oriented social contract based on a Kantian rationality. Rawls and Kant notoriously value the universal character of an agreement between rational parties. Gilligan believes however that the application of universal standards is “morally problematic, since it breeds moral blindness and indifference” [12], that is to say it encourages egotism. Besides, persons have varying degrees of interdependence and dependence on each other and different degrees of vulnerability, therefore the presupposition of their independence which is present in most social contract theories has many flaws. A relational ethics that presupposes the interdependence of beings seems to be a more adequate tool for dealing with the future of humanity and with life on Earth.

The goal of this alternative “veil of ignorance” is still to strengthen a notion of justice.

Environmental justice is a domain of human justice based on the hypothesis that humans are responsible beings located on a planet with natural resources that allow human life, but that such resources are jeopardized by current overuse and unsustainable practices. So, the future generations may have to struggle to survive on this planet in ways that are not familiar to the current or past generations. A Kantian-Rawlsian interpretation of this domain of justice is not, of course, precluded by the “veil of ignorance” that our experiment applied to particular circumstances of the humans and animals the parties care about. Yet the idea of environmental justice is still based on an intergenerational fairness, and therefore it makes more sense to apply a relational ethics in order to agree to some norms for it. Although care ethics is not as “normative” as the Kantian ethics and Mill’s utilitarianism, it allows however for some “norms”.

What we may obtain is the idea of intergenerational justice which considers the fact that the next generations are dependent on what the current generations are doing with natural resources such as the air, the soil, the forests and the water reserves, and on the current avoidance of major threats to the planet’s well-being, such as a nuclear war. Indeed, the future generations have an “asymmetric relation of dependency” [13] with the current generations, in that only the latter could prevent the anthropogenic threats to the environmental security that might affect the former.

Climate change is already a reality, apparent in the increasingly frequent extreme weather phenomena such as tropical hurricanes, severe thunderstorms, tornadoes, draughts, or powerful winter storms. The environmental insecurity also affects a part of Earth’s current population, especially the people who have the most difficult access to scarce resources such as safe food and clean water when a disaster hit. Among the most vulnerable populations in disaster conditions are the pregnant women and the infants. According
to some estimations published in the *Maternal and Child Health Journal* [14], approximately 56,000 pregnant women and 75,000 infants were directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, which hit the U.S. Gulf Coast in 2005.

Therefore, a care ethics that includes concerns for environmental security should also consider these populations’ vulnerability in the context of extreme weather conditions. The need to find an “Archimedean point” from which care for the most vulnerable urges the parties to responsibly use the natural resources should also consider those persons who already are the most affected by climate change. The idea of a “veil of ignorance” based on the ethics of care also includes the empathy with persons who are vulnerable to or affected by current disasters.

Again, actions to prevent such disasters require more sustainable practices and ways of living. So, the response given by an ethics of care to the dilemma “to be or not to be sustainable” becomes obvious.

### 6. Conclusions

Care ethics is an alternative to the Kantian and utilitarian ethics, in that it aims at encouraging interconnectedness, compassion and empathy with vulnerable humans and animals or even with species and ecosystems. “The Overview Effect” experienced by space explorers is in tune with the inter-connectedness of humans and other species on Earth. The future of life on this planet could be promoted through sustainable development, but on the other hand it is often undermined by “the tragedy of the commons”.

In order to find an “Archimedean point” from which intergenerational justice is pursued through sustainability, the parties should, I suggested, empathize with the potential suffering of their imagined relatives, friends or pets, who could be impaired by severe environmental degradation. In the proposed mental experiment, the parties don’t know what level of access their loved ones might have to vital resources in the future. The possibility that they could be among the most disadvantaged in a competition for vital resources in circumstances of extreme environmental scarcity should influence the parties’ responsible decisions to engage in sustainable practices. Such empathy with persons who are dependent on their sustainable use of natural resources and may have to pay the bill of their present waste can consequently be a moral incentive for the parties to agree to confront the current environmental challenges with appropriate choices and to treat this issue as a priority.

**Note**


**REFERENCES**


**TAG:** ecosistema, ecosystems, proceedings, sostenibilità, sustainability, diritto dell'ambiente

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