On the Imperative of Sustainable Development: A Philosophical and Ethical Appraisal

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Introduction

One of the most remarkable things about the concept of sustainable development is that it has become part of a small set of words like democracy, justice, fairness, equity and transparency that almost everyone seems to support, and almost no one seems to reject. As such, the concept of sustainable development has become part of a common vocabulary among those who are concerned about the impact of human activity on the ecological basis of our existence. In spite of the misgivings of some commentators, sustainable development has become strongly associated with a moral imperative that apparently no one can ignore or reject without having to provide very good reasons for dissent. And yet, while the term sustainable development has become widespread in recent times, there is little indication that a clear global consensus has also emerged about the content, the interpretation and the implementation of this moral imperative.

In this paper, I discuss four different interpretations of the moral imperative to promote sustainable development that have emerged since the early 1970s. Although the differences between these interpretations have only been clearly recognised in philosophical and ethical terms over the last decade, it is not possible to provide an overview of the emerging battlelines in debates about sustainable development by restricting oneself to developments since the 1992 Earth Summit. In fact, current debates about the meaning and implementation of sustainable development are still informed by various philosophical and ethical interpretations formed before 1992.

In the discussion of each one of these four interpretations, I shall briefly survey the historical and philosophical context within which that interpretation has emerged. Each will also be appraised in terms of its implications, effects, strengths and weaknesses. Attention will be drawn to the fact that none of these interpretations is ideologically neutral. Working with the critical conception of ideology as the utilisation of meaning in the service of asymmetrical power relations (Thompson, 1990), two of the sections will be concluded with an indication of how a particular interpretation of sustainable development can have the effect of establishing, justifying or maintaining relationships of domination and exploitation. Two further sections, however, will conclude with references to the significant role that the concept of sustainable development can play in ideology critique.
This is done with a view to show that the highly contested character of the concept of sustainable development can be ascribed to its ambivalent ideological dimensions: it can either function as an ideology, or as a critique of ideology (which of course in itself can be interpreted as an ideology, in so far as it serves the interests of those engaged in ideology critique). Furthermore, the objective here is to show that an agenda of radical ethical questioning and ideology critique can be used to find a position for decision-making and actions within debates about the meaning and implementation of sustainable development.

**Sustainable development as a green agenda of nature conservation**

A first glimpse of the ideological character of the different interpretations of the meaning and implementation of sustainable development is evident when we consider them within their historical and philosophical contexts. Acherberg (1994a; Eckerley, 1992) points out that one of these historical contexts is that of a realisation in the 1970s amongst Western nations that industrialisation and exponential growth in resource consumption and human population seriously jeopardise the continued existence of a safe, healthy, clean and diverse environment. Characterised as it is in terms of a crisis or a turning point for humanity, this realisation is articulated in various reports, principally The Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) and *A Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith et al., 1972). In order to overcome this crisis and to ensure the survival of society, various structural adjustments to the economy and to social life were proposed in order to attain a state of equilibrium in which material growth is halted, although expansion in services enabling a higher quality of life in terms of education, cultural activities, experience of nature or enjoyment of leisure time was deemed to be in order. With his proposals for a steady-state economy, Herman Daly (1973) became one of the most articulate proponents of a zero-growth economy.

In the wake of Garret Hardin’s essay *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968), theorists like Heilbroner (1974) and Ophuls (1973 and 1977) proposed highly controversial solutions to the environmental crisis, which continue to find sporadic support. These entail a virtual if not de facto suspension of democracy in which problem-solving is left to a centralised government and its bureaucratic structures. From this perspective, solutions are sought through structured planning based on expert knowledge, science and technology. It can be granted that proposals such as these are motivated by the sobering realism that people will not willingly give up a way of life, particularly when it entails the enjoyment of relative privileges. However, they very soon encountered the criticism that theirs was an authoritarian, top-down approach to the implementation of sustainable development (Eckerley, 1992). Participation of people affected by these solutions was not taken seriously, and alternative forms of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge systems, were ignored (Jacobs, 1999).
An example of an alternative approach to the implementation of sustainable development from that time can be found in *A Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith et al., 1972:30) in which four main pre-requisites for a sustainable society (conceptualised as a state of equilibrium) were articulated:

- a minimal disruption of ecological processes;
- maximum conservation of resources and energy;
- a population in which only the losses are replaced;
- a social system in which the individual does not feel limited by the first three conditions, but instead enjoys them.

Such a social system was envisaged to consist of decentralised, self-sufficient communities in which people worked close to home, governed themselves and developed their own personal and communal identities, formed values and ideals in which they could take pride, and could be happier than they would have been in the anonymous mass existence of a centralised metropolitan life.

In so far as this implies a transformative, if not revolutionary, agenda of an alternative lifestyle in which current patterns of production and consumption are challenged, and the ideal of minimal impact on supporting ecosystems is taken seriously, this interpretation has much in common with most of the other notions of sustainable development discussed below. However, it has been criticised for its utopian character since it serves an agenda of maximum environmental protection and nature conservation – the flipside of a total suspension of all material growth in the economy. It has also been criticised for having highly untenable implications for those living in developing countries. A global policy of a zero-growth, steady-state economy would confine those living in developing countries to the trap of a highly skewed and unjust distribution of the world’s resources, with no hope of ever changing the material basis, or substantively improving the quality, of their lives. As formulated by Feenberg (1979, cited in Ekersley, 1992:16), seeking a solution to the environmental crisis in a state of equilibrium “leads to a politics of despair that would freeze the current relations of force in the world – and with them the injustices they sustain – as a condition for solving the issue of survival”.

An alternative, more realistic interpretation of sustainable development can be given in terms of ecological fit, i.e. staying within the carrying-capacity of supporting ecosystems (Achterberg, 1994a). Here, ecological sustainability is neither incompatible with the use of natural resources on a level higher than one of minimum impact, nor is it incompatible with a certain measure of material growth in the economy. In short, then, sustainability does not equal minimum impact on nature.

With this in mind, it becomes possible to unmask the ideological character of arguments for sustainable development that appeal to a state of equilibrium with minimum impact on ecosystems and maximum conservation of nature. Such arguments can justify maintaining and perpetuating a neo-Malthusian lifeboat ethic 7 in which the advantages of the affluent are protected (in the name of nature conservation), while a death sentence is pronounced on the poor (Eckersley, 1992) by not allowing them to utilise nature directly to secure their livelihoods.
Arguments for environmental protection to reach a steady-state economy are largely something of the past, but arguments for minimum impact on natural resources and maximum environmental protection are still prevalent today. Their potential to impact negatively on the opportunities of the poor to use natural resources directly to survive is real. As Shiva has confirmed repeatedly (e.g., 1988, 1993, 2002), the direct use of nature by the world's poor may be their only chance of survival, and this need not entail use patterns that exceed the carrying-capacity of supporting ecosystems. On the contrary, there are numerous examples of the direct use of nature by poor people that are based on indigenous knowledge systems and display an ecological fit.

Problems like these indicate that the satisfaction of human needs, in particular those of the poor, as well as the notion of material growth within the economy, can and should form part of the core meaning of sustainable development. This is exactly what was emphasised in one of the other historical contexts within which the notion of sustainable development emerged during the 1970s.

**Sustainable development as a social and economic agenda of needs satisfaction**

The second historical context within which the notion of sustainable development has emerged is a series of United Nations conferences about environment and development, the first of which was held in Stockholm in 1972, and which also includes the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A number of reports are closely associated with these conferences and have substantively informed them. The most important of these are the *World Conservation Strategy* (IUCN et al., 1980) and *Our Common Future*, also known as the *Brundtland Report* (WCED, 1987).

In this context, the poorer countries of the world rebelled against Western preoccupations with the natural environment and the environmental policies to protect it. Where the notion of sustainability within the first context predominated called for *limits to physical growth*, the call from within this second context was rather for *development (in particular of the poor) within the physical limits* of the supporting ecological systems. It was emphasised that our responses to environmental concerns should never be at the cost of the legitimate aspirations of the poorer nations of the world to overcome poverty and to reach a standard of living that is comparable to that of the richer nations. Accordingly, development in the sense of satisfaction of human needs, as well as in that of intra-generational justice, i.e. equitable access to the natural resources of the world, were seen as preconditions for sustainable development (Achterberg, 1994a).

It is within this second context that the *Brundtland Report* (WCED, 1987:43) formulated the well-known definition of sustainable development that has received global support. This definition states that "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of
future generations to meet their needs”. What is often overlooked is the emphasis the Brundtland Report placed on the following:

- the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given;
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.

This interpretation of sustainable development, however, seems to under-emphasise the imperatives of nature conservation and environmental protection, and fails to provide clear guidelines for environmental protection when the interests of humans and nature are directly in conflict with one another. This stems from the substantive anthropocentrism of Our Common Future, and the so-called weak notion of sustainable development that follows from it.

In terms of anthropocentrism, nature is considered to be of value only in so far as it can be utilised as a resource for humans. The intrinsic value of nature, i.e. the value that it has independent of its use value to humans, is ignored. Similarly, environmental problems are predominantly conceptualised as management problems: they can be overcome through better management and/or better technology. This is clearly borne out by the fact that the only concept of limitation explicitly acknowledged in Our Common Future is that of the state of technology and social organisation. As such, this concept of limitation also reinforces what has become known in environmental economics as a weak conception of sustainable development.

According to this weak notion, sustainable development has been achieved if the overall stock of capital has been maintained over time. This means that natural capital (resources) can be exchanged with human and financial capital without compromising the ideal of sustainable development itself (Norton, 1992). As such, the weak notion is based on the assumption of the inter-substitutability of different forms of capital. The sacrifice of a natural resource could thus be justified indefinitely by (and balanced or traded off against) what is gained in terms of financial capital (expressed in monetary terms), or in terms of human capital (gains in, for example, infrastructure such as roads and buildings, or advances in science and technology). Weak sustainable development, therefore, only provides protection to parts or aspects of nature if it pays to do so, i.e. if its continued existence (conservation) could be traded for a higher price in monetary or human terms than it would otherwise fetch in an open market of commodities or services.

This kind of cost-benefit analysis characterises the dominant thinking about environmental policy and decision-making globally, and stands in stark contrast to the strong notion of sustainable development. Strong sustainable development entails the maintenance of natural capital over time. This implies that there are certain circumstances under which gains in financial and human capital cannot compensate for the loss of nature.

From this perspective, it becomes evident that a weak notion of sustainable development, legitimised as it is by its anthropocentric emphasis on meeting
human needs (in particular those of the poor), can serve the ideological function of justifying and perpetuating the exploitation of natural resources far beyond the limits of the carrying-capacity of supporting ecosystems. Such unsustainable exploitation, the argument goes, is in order as long as it is balanced by gains in financial and human capital. As such, a weak notion of sustainable development cannot be used effectively to challenge patterns of production and consumption that exceed the limits of supporting ecosystems, but have a high financial or human value, for instance by producing a large number of jobs.

However, increases in financial and human capital cannot always balance or compensate for the loss of nature. A stronger, more robust approach to sustainable development is needed in order to acknowledge the notion of the intrinsic value of nature, and at the same time overcome the dichotomy between the satisfaction of human needs and environmental protection.

**Sustainable development as an integrated agenda of caring for the community of life on earth**

An articulation of this stronger, integrative approach to sustainable development can be found in *Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living* (IUCN et al., 1991), the follow-up to the *World Conservation Strategy*. In this report, the ideals of sustainable development are refined into a strategy for sustainable living. Mention is also made of a strategy for a sustainable economy. The publication focuses on quality of life, and not only on survival issues. Holding onto the notion that an activity is sustainable if it can be maintained indefinitely, sustainable development is defined as improvement in the quality of human life, so far as it is possible within the boundaries of the carrying-capacity of the ecosystems on which it is dependent (IUCN et al., 1991:7). A sustainable economy would be the result of sustainable development. Such an economy would keep its natural resource base intact, but could continue to develop by adapting to change and by improvements in knowledge, organisation, technical efficiency and “wisdom” (see Achterberg, 1994a:29).

Elaborating on the vision articulated for sustainable development in the *World Conservation Strategy*, nine principles are proposed in *Caring for the Earth* that should form the ethical platform of sustainable living. These are:

- respect and care for the community of life (an ethical principle that defines a duty of care for other people and for all forms of life, now and in the future);
- improving the quality of human life;
- conserving the vitality and diversity of the Earth;
- minimising the exhaustion of non-renewable resources;
- keeping within the carrying-capacity of the Earth;
- changing personal attitudes and practices, in accordance with an ethic for sustainable living;
- enabling communities to care for their own environments;
• forming a national framework for the integration of development and conservation;
• forming a world alliance to implement sustainability on a global scale.

_Caring for the Earth_ (IUCN et al., 1991:12) notes that these principles, values and duties are not new and that they have been articulated in many of the world's cultures and religions for centuries. They also reflect many of the statements that have been made at United Nations conferences and in reports on the need for equity, the participation of all stakeholders in decisions impacting on their well-being, conservation of nature, and economic efficiency as prerequisites for sustainable development. In short, these principles reflect an essential support for the principle of respect for life in general, emphasising the importance of nature and ecosystems that also include human life. The challenge for sustainable living from this perspective is therefore not to justify it, but rather to help individuals and nations apply it to concrete actions and practices. Accordingly, the bulk of _Caring for the Earth_ is devoted to the suggestion and explanation of a large number of actions that should be taken within different contexts "if we are truly to care for the Earth" (IUCN et al., 1991:65).

From the perspective of _Caring for the Earth_’s integration of the concern about needs satisfaction and respect for the community of life, the Earth Summit of 1992 and its attendant documents (the _Rio Declaration_ and _Agenda 21_) represent a step backwards to a strong anthropocentric interpretation of sustainable development. In fact, in its emphasis on people in the concern for sustainable development, as well as for the eradication of poverty and injustice in the distribution of the world’s resources, the _Rio Summit_ and its declarations do not add anything new to what was articulated in the _Brundtland Report_ of 1987.

This does not mean that the Earth Summit of 1992 was a failure. It did register a remarkable moral consensus among the political leaders of the world about the importance of sustainable development, as well as a commitment, if only in principle, to a demanding programme of action and policy formulation for the 21st century. According to Achterberg (1994a), the Earth Summit also confirmed a commitment to a political ethic of egalitarianism in terms of which all people should be accorded equal care and respect, regardless of the nation, culture or generation in which they find themselves.

The philosophical position of _Caring for the Earth_ could thus be interpreted as an effort to establish a convergence between the perspective of sustainable development (nature conservation and environmental protection) that has emerged from industrialised countries, and the emphasis on development as needs satisfaction that has emerged from the poorer nations of the world. In its emphasis on respect for the entire community of life, the strong anthropocentric position of the _Brundtland Report_ is challenged. At the same time, in its strong emphasis on improving the quality of human life, in particular by addressing the problems of skewed and unjust access to the world’s natural resources, the strong nature-centred position of conservationists in industrialised countries is also criticised.
But what would it entail to implement these ideals in real-life contexts? On this question, *Caring for the Earth* only provides general, abstract answers, although one of its principles (namely changing attitudes and behaviour) may be pointing us towards exploring the notion of sustainable development as a radical political and ethical agenda of intellectual and institutional transformation.

**Sustainable development as a radical political and ethical agenda of transformation**

Sustainable development has always been closely associated with an agenda of social, institutional and intellectual transformation. In its first articulations in industrialised countries, it challenged dominant patterns of production and consumption, calling not only for a change in lifestyle and social organisation, but also for a fundamental reorganisation of the format of societal governance and the mode of material production. Similarly, from the perspective of the poorer nations of the world, sustainable development not only called for a more equitable distribution of the wealth of the world amongst everyone living at present, but also expanded the notion of justice to include future generations. Also, in *Caring for the Earth*, a revolutionary paradigm shift in our ethical perspective is proposed, in which concerns about the well-being of humans are embedded within respect for the community of life, without negating the moral imperative of addressing the needs of the poor and the destitute.

Taking a closer look at this transformative agenda, we can discern the underlying idea that incisive structural adjustments on different levels will be required in order to achieve sustainable development. Within industrialised societies, it was realised that mere adjustments in individual lifestyles and values would not in themselves establish a state of ecologically sustainable development. What was required, rather, was a fundamental reduction of consumption (implying an “economy of enough”) and a drastic collective change in lifestyle, linked to structural changes in social institutions and government (Achterberg, 1994b:143). At the same time, rich as well as poor nations realised that issues of international justice, that is, the distribution of wealth between those living now, and joint decision-making about the matter, should receive structural and institutional attention as essential prerequisites of sustainable development.

The idea of sustainable development, however, challenges us also to think and act transformationally with regard to the self and self-realisation. This point is neatly captured by Ekersley (1992:17–21) when she observes that the environmental crisis at its deepest level is not one of physical limits to growth and distributional issues alone, but also a crisis of culture and character. What she means by this is that the environmental crisis of our time challenges us to the point of questioning the very notion of material progress, and lamenting the social and psychological costs associated with the dominance of instrumental rationality. Included among these
costs are alienation, loss of meaning, the coexistence of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, welfare dependence, dislocation of tribal cultures, and the growth of an international urban monoculture with a concomitant reduction in cultural diversity (Eckersley, 1992:17-18).

Turning this depressing cultural diagnosis into a positive point, Eckersley (1992:20) proceeds to argue that this situation has been perceived by a new breed of ecopolitical theorists active in the 1980s and 1990s as an opportunity to emancipate us from the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and social practices that underlie the environmental crisis. In this regard, the focus falls in particular on challenges to dominant thinking in three inter-related areas, namely human needs, technology and self-image. This leads to critical inquiries into the structure of human needs and the appropriateness of many modern technologies. Summarised in the words of Eckersley (1992:20):

It is no longer considered adequate merely to challenge, say, the site of a nuclear power plant, freeway or chemical industry, or merely to insist on better safety devices or pollution filters. Instead ... [we have] to draw attention to the more fundamental question: to what extent do we really need these kinds of energy sources, these means of transport, these industries and technologies ...?

The transformational agenda of sustainable development leads to similar far-reaching questions about who we are and what we live for on this earth. What is at stake here is the whole conception of, and relation between, humanity and the world – the material, cultural and spiritual worlds – which leads us further to the central and eternal question: what is human life? (Castoriadis, 1981, cited in Eckersley, 1992:20).

That questions like these have been formulated amongst emancipatory theorists and political activists from the 1960s onwards does not reduce their contemporary currency. Still relevant today, they are being discussed in increasingly widening circles of people concerned with sustainable development. It is a pity, however, that most of these questions are not taken seriously, let alone deliberated, by the dominant centre of society. A clear case in point is the decision by the American government not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 to reduce global warming.

These questions are too often and too easily dismissed in certain circles as the ranting of a lunatic fringe that has to be marginalised as effectively and as quickly as possible (witness responses to the demonstrations at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation in 2000). It is, therefore, significant that many of the questions and issues that constitute the radically transformative agenda of sustainable development have been taken up since the beginning of the 1990s by a revitalised civil society across the globe that functions alongside and independently of the state. Thus the imperative to promote sustainable development merges with the emancipatory and critical agendas of an astonishingly wide array of social movements and organisations concerned with the issues of feminism, peace,
third-world aid and development, HIV/AIDS and the like. Furthermore, these organs of civil society, constrained as they are by prejudicial media coverage, lack of funds, fragmentation etc., move to a large extent one step ahead of theory, and can therefore inform theorists in finding ways of “overcoming the destructive logic of capital accumulation, the acquisitive values of consumer society, and more generally, all systems of domination (including class domination, patriarchy, imperialism, racism, totalitarianism, and the domination of nature)” (Eckersley, 1992:21).

Conclusion

What follows from this discussion of different interpretations of the moral imperative to promote sustainable development? In the first place, it is evident that none of these interpretations is neutral; rather, they represent ideological positions in so far as they justify and promote the interests of certain sectors of global society. The fact that these interests clash and are often mutually exclusive is a clear indication that any interpretation of sustainable development functions as a set of normative ideas. Such a set of normative ideas can function as guidelines for personal actions, and as a baseline in terms of which governments, industry, commerce, consumers and citizens can be held accountable for their actions.

The serious problem, however, is that there are different interpretations of the moral agenda of sustainable development, and this can lead to different models of accountability. In this regard, it can be useful to look at this diversity from the perspective of ideology critique, and to identify a number of critical questions that should be asked of each interpretation. Formulated in general terms, some of the central questions that need to be asked are: whose interests are served by adopting this or that agenda of sustainable development? Whose power is served and through which mechanisms? And who or what stands to win or lose in which ways from adopting this particular agenda of sustainable development, rather than that one? Are new forms of dependency created by adopting this or that interpretation of the agenda of sustainable development? Are new forms of domination and exploitation created, or are we in the process of creating conditions that slowly but surely push back domination and exploitation in the world? With questions like these, we can start to come to grips with the ethical implications of the different concepts of sustainable development discussed above.

What has also emerged from the discussion above is that the different interpretations of sustainable development provide ideologically loaded answers to fundamental value questions (see Achterberg, 1994a:36) such as:

- What is so important that we should strive to maintain it forever? Is it expansion in material growth; consumption; survival; needs satisfaction; quality of life; the flourishing of life on earth; the diversity and abundance of life on earth; or the ecological basis of life in general?
- With a view to whom or what should we pursue the sustainability of this valuable something? Do we do it for the sake of nature, or the sake of people; do
we do it for the sake of the rich or that of the poor; or for the sake of the whole of the community of life?

- How should we pursue sustainability? From a centralised position in a top-down manner with experts and science and technology; from a participative position in a bottom-up manner in which consensus, as well as indigenous and cultural knowledge systems, plays a large role; or with a combination of these approaches as circumstances and context dictate?

- How would we know that we have moved nearer to or further away from sustainable development? Do we make use of financial indicators alone; do we use wider and more comprehensive economic indicators to assess costs and benefits; do we use indicators from social and political life – for example the satisfaction that people experience from work, or what they can identify with as individuals and groups; do we use indicators from nature – for example the behaviour of indicator species to detect almost imperceptible changes in the climate of a region; or do we combine all of the above? And exactly how do we determine the threshold values that should apply to any set of indicators that is chosen, and whether they are exceeded or not?

In the last instance, it can be maintained that the imperative to promote sustainable development is a moral appeal to all of us to think clearly and anew about the answers that we personally give to the four fundamental value questions above.

From this perspective, the agenda of sustainable development is one of radical and critical questioning of ourselves and our motives, of the social bases of our actions, and of the implications and effects of these actions on others: people, future generations and other members of the community of life. If this point is missed, however, sustainable development could become just another entry in the current list of ideologies in the service of the status quo that leave the world, with all its risks and injustices, much as it is.

**Endnotes**

1. This is a substantially expanded version of Hattingh (2002) and Hattingh (2000).
2. Achterhuis (1994) refers to the lie of sustainability. Jickling (1999) is concerned about the moralistic and deterministic overtones of much of the propaganda for sustainable development. Patterson (1998) sees the concept of sustainable use as a green mask used by industry and governments to justify and continue the ruthless exploitation of natural resources.
5. Ideas like these can be traced back to John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848:752–756). See Achterberg's (1994a:12–13) related discussion.
7. He argued that freedom in the unregulated commons would bring ruin to all, and therefore that only "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon, by the majority of the people affected," would put us in a position to overcome the crisis of survival.
8. These implications form a sub-class of the generic criticism that proponents of a steady-state economy are misanthropic, i.e. that they deplore humankind.
Such a lifeboat ethic, heavily criticised as it has been for its Malthusian assumptions and implications, has been explicitly formulated by Hardin (1968 and 1992).

However, it is true that certain phrases, particularly in Chapter 2 of this report, suggest a marginal acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of nature.

The notion of "weak sustainability" is explained later. Its "weakness" refers to the limited protection that it offers to nature that has no use value to humans.

This is predominantly true of stronger versions of anthropocentrism. In versions of enlightened anthropocentrism, the value of the independent existence of nature can be acknowledged, although this is often done on the basis of the instrumental value of nature for purposes of recreation, or for the satisfaction gained from knowing that wild nature still exists somewhere on earth.

Achterhuis (1994:202), for example, argues that the recommendations of the Bandimal Report could, "after a short-lived profit, lead to long-term accelerated destruction of both humanity and nature".

The stronger, more robust interpretation of sustainable development of Caring for the Earth is not so much motivated by ecocentric sentiments as it is by a form of weak (or enlightened) anthropocentrism – a position that is widely accepted amongst moderate environmental ethicists. See Norton's (1984) positive evaluation of enlightened anthropocentrism.

These theorists include Murray Bookchin, John Rodman, Theodore Roszak, Christopher Stone, Arne Naess, Bill Deval, George Sessions, Kirkpatrick Sale, John Dryzek, Karen J. Warren, and Val Plumwood.

Jacobs (1999) conceptualises the different answers that can be given to these value questions in terms of a number of "fault lines" that can be discerned in the concept of sustainable development.