

The Moral Imperatives of Sustainable Development: A Kantian Overview

Imperatywy moralne zrównoważonego rozwoju: podejście kantowskie

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Abstract

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant based on the logical analysis of reason in general and moral reason in particular. To him, moral principles should come from reason not from experiences. The general formula based on reason is *the Categorical Imperative*; it is the Moral Law. In this paper Sustainable Development is revisited from *Categorical Imperative* point of view. Three aspects of sustainable development like need, justice and the environmental limitation is given equal importance and the entire discussion is broadly distinguished into three different categories viz., *Kantian Social Imperative, Kantian Economic Imperative and Kantian Environmental Imperative*.

Key words: Sustainable Development, Moral Reasoning, Kantian Social Imperative, Kantian Economic Imperative, Kantian Environmental Imperative

Streszczenie

Filozofia Immanuela Kanta oparta jest w ogólności na logicznej analizie rozumu, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem rozumowania moralnego. Według niego zasady moralne powinny pochodzić z rozumu, a nie z doświadczenia. Najważniejszy jest oparty na rozumie *Imperatyw kategoryczny*; to Prawo Moralne. W tym artykule problematyka zrównoważonego rozwoju została omówiona z perspektywy *Imperatywu kategorycznego*. Trzem aspektom zrównoważoności: potrzebom, sprawiedliwości i ograniczeniom środowiskowym nadana równą rangę, a cała dyskusja uwzględnia trzy różne kategorie: *kantowski imperatyw społeczny, kantowski imperatyw ekonomiczny i kantowski imperatyw środowiskowy*.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, rozumowanie moralne, kantowski imperatyw społeczny, kantowski imperatyw ekonomiczny, kantowski imperatyw środowiskowy

Introduction

The concept sustainable development was placed firmly on International agenda in UN report *Our common future* thirty years ago. On September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly launched the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, consisting of 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets to guide world development towards 2030 (UN,

2015). The goals provided an important first step towards a world with less poverty, fewer environmental problems, and reduced inequalities. However, then UN formulation for sustainable development goals is a bit problematic, as it focused only on what we can and what we do and too little emphasis on what we must and should do. This paper is all about on what we must and should do to achieve sustainable development. The moral imperative of sustaina-

ble development synthesizes past reasoning, summarizes the present debate and provides a clear direction for future thinking.

The world, in which we live today, is full of contradictions. There are democracies, but strong armies protect these. There is plenty, but surrounded by poverty. We are prosperous, but haunted by perpetual dissatisfaction. This has not happened all of a sudden, but is the outcome of the progress of our materialistic civilization; a civilization which has identified development with economic growth only. This has encouraged consumerism. Henceforth it consists with two principles that is: commodifying the nature and society consists of only human beings. The economic development patterns adopted from developed countries alter the nature of humans from food gatherer to a chauvinistic master. The turning point mostly influenced through the works of Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring*, Paul Ehrlich's (1968) *Population Bomb*, and Garret Hardin's (1968) *Tragedy of Commons*. Thus, there started a movement of balance from the environment and society to development and from development to environment and society. The international prominence of sustainable development was adopted and released on 1987's Brundtland report on *Our Common Future* by World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, 8). After the report the concept sustainable development often entails the integration of three interdependent dimensions viz., economic, social and environmental. The concept of sustainability therefore steamed out of the reorganization that economic development on a global level and it cannot be separated from social and environmental development.

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Two things fill in the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the most frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: the starry sky above and the moral law within me.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*

The aim of Immanuel Kant was to make each and every individual as a practical reasoner. Practical reason includes more than the economic value, each and every individual practical reason has the strategic rationality and the potency to construct different hypothetical choices but also they have the moral will to act rationally or with responsibility where the question of justice involved. Practical reason means more than the autonomy of will; only knowing the right is insufficient; one must be able to take action itself of practical reason. Practical reason promotes autonomous moral choice in oneself and in others. Practical reason is the application of moral imperatives in an environment of cross-currents, desires,

wants, emotions, relationships, and human concerns, and all those right human prosecutions.

Kant is well-known for his social and economic approaches however, we have also made an attempt to suffice moral concern for environmental approaches, so that the three pillars of sustainable development can be given equal importance. Sustainable development is addressed from Categorical Imperative point of view. The moral imperative of sustainable development demands a shift from individual economical paradigm to universal ethical paradigm for a sustainable future. In this section we broadly deal with Kant's Categorical Imperative and the application of the law of Categorical Imperatives in the principles of sustainable development.

Categorical Imperative

In the *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* (GW), Kant emphasizes to act according to the fundamental principle, which he calls, categorical imperative and it contains three fundamental laws.

Accordingly, the first law of categorical imperative: *act on a maxim only if it can be universalized* (GW, 4:429). This implies that if a person thinks that *cruelty to animal or their killing* is valid for the sake of economic then it may also include the implicit exception of human, and animals, which is immoral. Therefore, the formula of universal law is also relevant for animals though they are not bound to observe universal law. Similarly, if a person finds *the cutting of trees* to be a maxim and it is universalized, then everyone will be allowed to do the same and consequently there will be no existence of human life along with the extinction of trees and various species of birds and animals residing on them. Furthermore, we should produce only that amount of greenhouse gases which the environment can withstand if everyone produced the same amount. In developed countries, a huge amount of greenhouse gases have been produced in order to cope with the lifestyle of their citizens. If there is no regulation on the emission of these gases, then their quantity will increase significantly which would lead to destructive consequences. If one acts according to law of universalizability, the production of these gases can be reduced to some extent and the environment can be conserved.

Kant's second law of categorical imperative, i.e., formula of humanity which states that *Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means* (GW, 4:429), is also applicable to non-humans as well. Though, Kant has not given moral consideration to non-humans, he insists that animals and plants cannot be used merely as means or destructed based on their moral status. Moreover, the formula of humanity has been considered as a corollary for the formula of universal law.

Consequently, the scope of the former is as wide as that of the latter. It is unacceptable to *destroy the environment* in accordance with the formula of universal law because humans are dependent on the environment and destroying it will lead to a contradictory situation of existence of humans. Similarly, the law of humanity can be extended to any sentient being and can be restated as *Act in such a way that you always treat sentience in yourself as well as every other sentient being never as a means only but also at the same time as an end* (GW, 4:431).

Similarly, Kant's third law of categorical Imperative, i.e., formula of end-in-itself which states that *Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means* (GW, 4:429). This formula holds a form of responsibility of each human towards the others without any reason. This is exactly one of the principles of ethics of sustainability such, to protect the rights of the contemporaries as well as future generations. This formula also emphasizes on treating others (the nature and the non-humans) as an end not as mere means.

Revisiting the Concept of Sustainable Development with Categorical Imperative

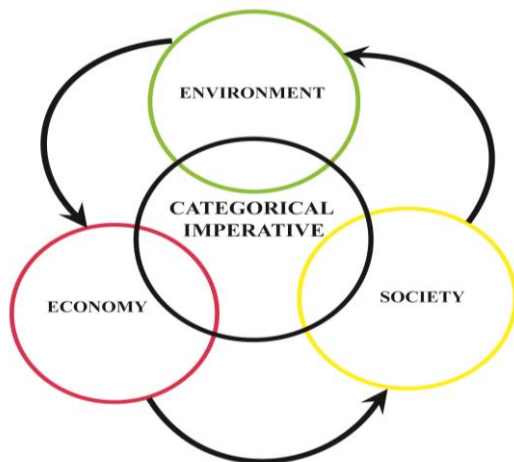


Figure 1. A Suggested Model.

A presentation of the above suggested model on sustainability from Kant's Categorical Imperative, can serve the present need. In this section, the implications of the three well-known formulae of Categorical Imperative given by Kant are analyzed in promoting the new suggested model.

According to the formula of universalization, it can be asserted that it is the duty of a rational agent or moral agent (like corporate agent) to act such that pure air, pure water and fertile land can be availed and easily accessible by other fellow humans, non-humans and to the future generations. It is opined that the duty of one individual is to promote the rights of other in order to exist in a sustainable society by extending a fellow-feeling-ness and responsiveness.

Kant's Social Imperative

Though social sustainability got recognition with the definition of sustainable development by the World Commission on Environment and Development, it has still been the least understood and least developed aspects out of the triads, i.e., social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability. Social sustainability comprises sustainability in the dimensions of social equality, social justice, social support, social capital, social responsibility, human rights, community development, cultural competence, human adaptation and similar other aspects. It has been viewed in two different ways by different researchers: while one asserts that it encompasses all human activities (Paul et al., 2015), i.e., all the domains of sustainability are social, including ecological, economic, political and cultural sustainability, the other posits it distinctly with relation to economic as well as environmental sustainability (McKenzie, 2004). Researchers such as Elkington (1998) and Fukuyama (1995) have provided economic renditions of social sustainability by supporting that social capital, which forms its important constituent, is accorded import because it reduces economic transaction costs. Though these studies are considered as milestones in analyzing sustainability, it has been argued that society must be sustained on its own rights (Dillard et al., 2009). The definition sustainability given by Elkington (1998) supports the argument that *we need to bear in mind that it is not possible to achieve a desired level of ecological or social or economic sustainability (separately), without achieving at least a basic level of all three forms of sustainability, simultaneously*. In his own words, *the sustainability agenda, long understood as an attempt to harmonies the traditional financial bottom line with emerging thinking about the environmental bottom line, is turning out to be much more complicated than some early business enthusiasts imagined. Increasingly, we think in terms of a 'triple bottom line', focusing on economic prosperity, environmental quality, and—the element which business has tended to overlook—social justice* (Elkington, 1998, p. 75). Yet, it has been found that the social aspect of sustainability has received very less attention of researchers as compared to the other two aspects. Furthermore, the ethical theories and categorical imperatives of Kant have always provided intrinsic values to humans so that they can act in such a way which will lead to social sustainability. It is very obvious in all the three formulations of Categorical Imperatives discussed in the previous section, for instance Kant asserts that *so act as to treat humanity, whether in their own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only*. The implications of Kant's Categorical Imperative to obtain social sustainability by interrelating it with economic as well as logical aspects is elaborated in the sequel.

Kant's Economic Imperative

The effect of business on humans and the natural environment was negligible when it was carried out in a small scale in its initial stage. However, the growth of business has been tremendous in the last few decades. Though business is essential for prosperity of a nation, its harmful effects on humans and environment are now clearly evident. To name a few, business has imposed nuclear threat, caused degradation of environment, explosion of population, economic gaps between developed and developing countries, and breakdown of morality in humans. Moreover, situations of social stratification, displacement of families and cultural breakdown have also been witnessed by different countries as a consequence of business activities. Today, each and every person lives within the global market economy and hence, no one can escape from the dreadful consequences of unethical business practices.

Thus, to find out the sustainable ways of conducting a business has been the major concern of many researchers, activists as well as environmentalists in the recent years. Though the terms *business* and *ethics* were considered oxymoron by various academicians, it has been gradually realized that both of them have to be practiced simultaneously in order to achieve sustainable development. Also, it was observed that without ethics, business may be successful for a short period but cannot sustain in the long run. Therefore, business ethics is now being considered very seriously for the survival of human beings and business, safeguarding of consumers' rights and protecting employees and shareholders. Corporations can be considered as moral persons, consequently they have moral obligations to all those who are affected by their actions. According to Bowie (1999), human beings can act in ways that are not egoistic which means that they can concern themselves with ethical activities in business. He claims that the Kantian theory of ethics is one of the more useful theories which allow businesses as well as individuals to act morally and ethically even if it is not in their self-interest. In his book *Business Ethics: A Kantian Perspective*, Bowie describes the application of Kant's categorical imperatives in business in order to attain sustainable development. In accordance with the first formulation of categorical imperative of Kant, i.e., the formula of universal law, Bowie stresses that the concept which permits deception in business making it analogous to bluffing in poker is unethical and irrational. He emphasizes that trust is the most important factor for business to sustain and to be successful in the long run and hence cheating, lying, breaking promises and theft are not acceptable in business as they violate the law of universalizability. He, thus, exemplifies that *A deceitful promise is bad because the maxim which would allow the universalization of deceitful promises is self-contradictory...The business manager would ask*

whether the maxim which describes the proposed action could be willed universally without contradiction. If the maxim could be so willed, then the contemplated action is morally permissible. If it could not be so willed, then it is morally forbidden (Bowie, 1999, 15).

Indeed, if theft is universalized then all the properties will be destroyed. Similarly, cheating and lying will create a situation where no one can trust others and consequently, the customer's reliability upon business can be at stake which would in turn lead to its failure. Since telling truth and keeping promises have been considered as perfect duties by Kant, actions leading to the failure of the aforesaid duties can't be universalized. Hence the principle of universal law can be interpreted flexibly to meet commonsense objections in business.

The second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative, i.e., formula of humanity rejects notion of the treatment of human beings merely as means. Bowie states that considering stakeholders as humans, this principle can be well-applicable in economic decisions. By this, he means that if humanity of the stakeholders is considered as an end-in-itself and never mere means, then businesses or corporations have moral obligations to create meaningful work and not to lay off employees.

Kant's third formulation of the categorical imperative, well-known as *the Kingdoms of Ends* says that *you should act as if you were a member of an ideal kingdom of ends in which you were both subject and sovereign at the same time* (Bowie, 1999, p. 87). Bowie explains the implication of the third formula in economic imperative. He asserts that economic activities should be formulated as a moral community as it comprises of a group of individual human beings and consequently, it should be thought of as a democratic organization where employees have the rights to choose the rules which are imposed on them and every rule should be acceptable to all rational beings.

Kant's Environmental Imperative

The problems in the form of depletion of natural resources, climate change, pollution, etc. are being witnessed by everyone today because of our negligence towards protection of nature. Deforestation, i.e., cutting of forests by humans, in order to make concrete buildings and other similar purposes, is one of the main reasons behind the increment in the natural level of heat in the atmosphere. As a result, the increasing temperature has led to melting of snow caps and glaciers and consequently created a great amount of risk of submersion of islands as well as coastal regions. Extreme weather conditions such as storms, cyclones and other natural disasters are also considered to be the result of global warming. Furthermore, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report of 2007, the in-

crease in temperature has accelerated the rate of mortality due to heat stroke as well as the spread of infectious diseases.

Cruelty to animals has also led to various environmental issues. Factory farming, in which animals are subjected to minimal amount of care and forced to live in cramped conditions, is one of the major reasons behind abuse of land, animals and natural resources. These farms produce large amounts of waste and greenhouse gases which pollute soil, water and air. It also increases the transmission of several diseases from animals to humans. Though, the consequences of the availing human practices cannot be predicted accurately, it is obvious that several intense problems of severe weather, decrement of habitable land and food as well as increment in diseases have to be definitely encountered by humans if these practices are continued. These conditions may impose a threat on the existence and survival of human species in the future.

Kant defines *ecosystem* as the interface between human and natural systems which make up the whole world (Gillroy, 1998). Nonhumans, i.e., animals constitute a significant part of the ecosystem and therefore sustainability in every form requires an ethical relationship between humans, animals as well as nature. Kant asserts that though both humans and animals have desires and can feel pleasure or pain, the former are capable of holding their desires and thus have an autonomy to choose their actions whereas the latter lack consciousness, reason as well as autonomy and hence they cannot be given moral status or equal consideration with humans. However, he also emphasizes that his argument does not provide humans the right to harm animals. He states that humans have duties in regards to animals, though not direct, in so far as their treatment towards the latter can affect their duties to other persons and thus writes: *if a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men* (Lecture on Ethics, 212 (27: 459)).

Therefore, one of the dominant interpretations of Kant's indirect duty towards animals is based on the psychological tendency of humans. Kant thinks that a person who is cruel to animals makes him insensitive towards suffering in general. As a result, he may disregard the sufferings and pain of fellow beings and consequently, fail to perform his direct duties to other persons by becoming cruel to humans as well. Moreover in regard to non-animal entities also, Kant insists that humans' responsibility to protect and conserve nature is their duty to themselves both individually and collectively which is evident from his

following statement: *A propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature (spiritus destructionis) is opposed to a human being's duty to himself; for it weakens or uproots that feeling in him which, though not itself moral, is still a disposition [Stimmung] of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely, to love something (e. g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it. (...) With regard to the animate but non-rational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other people* (MM, AA 6:443).

Also, in the words of John Martin Gillroy *Within Kantian philosophy, humanity, being the most prominent moral and strategically rational species on the planet, has duties to nature not only as the environment affects human moral agency or autonomy but also in terms of nature's existence as a functional end-in-itself* (Gillroy, 1998).

It is discussed by Gilroy (1998, 146) that human autonomy reflects on the perfection of our moral agency and it too emphasize on the role we play to protect the natural environment.

Conclusion

Human autonomous agent is the primitive concept in Kantian ethics. What do we want for the future: a sustainable environment or an unsustainable world? The need of the situation is to sustain. The basic principle of sustaining life is supporting future with the knowledge of past and actions of the present. However, what is our responsibility, being a citizen, being a business organization, being a human, well some answers are quite inclusive. All natural beings and things ought to be sustained whether it is humans or non-humans. In reply Ronald Engel (1990) says sustainability is *the kind of human activity that nourishes and perpetuates the historical fulfilment of the whole community of life on Earth*. The development path ways followed by any ways but it should follow the path of future sustainability. Henceforth it is a necessary condition that what we want to sustain. Sustainability first and foremost must be about solving the environmental, economic and social issues. To accomplish this sustainability must be taken as a categorical imperative and it is argued above how an imperative should be followed as a universal law by each and every individual, community, race, species etc. Sustainability based on a moral reason, which justify the universal ethics based on both human and non-human centric world views of one unify Earth ecosystem.

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