

History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development: Road-Mapping Interdisciplinarity for Wellbeing

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Abstract: *Issues and problems of sustainable development continue to characterize and shape global discourse. Sustainable development finds mention in virtually every conceivable discipline and endeavour: medicine, literature, politics, community development, globalisation and deep ecology, among others. Just as the growing literature on sustainable development reflects interdisciplinarity, the embrace of sustainable development processes and practices across cultures reflects desirability. The recent interdisciplinary literature on sustainable development not only suggests its desirability but also reflects the desideratum for the development of a distinctive area of scholarship - History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development, - a discipline that neither comes up, simpliciter, a science, a social science, nor an art. It is the critical concern of this paper to discursively outline what may be considered the imperative contents of History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development with particular reference to the question of sustainable development in developing and less developed countries. Through the method of content analysis, the paper critically reflects on selected secondary sources on sustainable development. Against the background of its finding of a growing concern for sustainable development in the 21st century global society, the paper recommends measures for entrenching the teaching and learning of History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development as a veritable tool for sustainable wellbeing.*

Keywords: Sustainable development; history; philosophy; wellbeing

“Nature isn’t a miracle cure for diseases. But by ...appreciating it we can reap the benefits of feeling happier and healthier...” Lucy McRobert (2016)

Introduction

To discursively outline what may be considered the imperative contents of History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development with particular reference to the question of sustainable development in developing and less developed countries, the paper comes up in four interrelated parts. In the introductory part we attempt to conceptualize the three key phenomena: history, philosophy and sustainable development. In the second part we attempt an interpretative analysis of the interplay between the three phenomena history, philosophy

and sustainable development. In the third section we attempt to roadmap the thematic concerns of an emergent History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development as conceived. Against the background of the 21st century global society and also, against the growing desideratum for sustainable development in a threatened ecosystem, the fourth and concluding section recommends measures for entrenching the teaching and learning of History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development as a veritable tool for sustainable wellbeing

The growth and development of all forms of knowledge - humanities, science or social science - dates back in time. It is by virtue of some kind of knowledge of the past - *history* - that man comes to comprehend what phenomena was once known and unknown and, when and how they became known. Thus, a knowledge of history is not only critical for intra- and inter-generational transmission of knowledge-forms, but also pivotal for human development.

As an academic discipline history attempts to interpret and explain the meaning of past events. Historians study all past aspects of life in society in relation to present developments and future aspirations. With the use of evidence, historians tell the story of man in time. According to Collingwoods (1946) history is a kind of research or enquiry into actions that have been done in the past, conducted by the interpretation of evidence. Thus, and as noted by Neff (1947) the British historian G.M. Trevelyan declares: let the science and research of the historian find the fact and let his imagination and art make clear its significance. From both Collingwood and Trevelyan we deduce that historians are essentially concerned with the enterprise of making sense of the past. History is then conceived, for the purposes of this paper, to be a body of knowledge that is founded on interpretation of facts.

Philosophy and history are though variously conceived, philosophy as an academic discipline shares intellectual affinities with history. Both disciplines - history and philosophy - attempt to “make sense” of some kind of reality. While historians attempt to “make sense” of the past through interpreting available facts or evidence, philosophers attempt to “make sense” of the totality of existence - past, present, future, observable and non-observable phenomena. A rather broad discipline with no known boundary to the contents of its discourse, philosophy deploys the following tools in its quest to make sense of the totality of existence: logic, analysis, argumentation, critique, contemplation, observation and critical evaluation, among others. Thus philosophy is defined as “the systematic study of the foundations of human knowledge with an emphasis on the conditions of its validity and finding answers to ultimate questions” (New World Encyclopedia, 2019).

Despite varied conceptions of philosophy the philosopher is, generally speaking, a critical thinker who seeks understanding in an undogmatic and open-minded manner. As a lover (*phileo*) of wisdom (*sophia*) the philosopher seeks to expand the frontiers of understanding in an uncompromising manner. Making sense of the totality of experience is important for the philosopher; as an appropriate understanding of the totality of existence is fulcrum to wellbeing.

Reference to wellbeing in the 21st century is almost synonymous with that growing intellectual and practical concern for sustainable development. As conceived by Brundtland Report (1987) for example, sustainable development refers to that kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. As further noted by Hahn et. al. (2015) *sustainable development* is a normative concept outlining desirable development paths in societies, with an interest in ensuring intergenerational justice".

An expositional analysis of the submissions of Brundtland and Hahn et.al. presents *sustainable development* as a theoretico-practical concern erected on three tripods; *intentionality* (or intent to meet), *desirable development* and *generational needs*. None of the tripods stand alone: where there are no generational needs, there is no need to *intend* meeting some desirable goals or development. The very rationale for desirable development springs from the need to meet generational needs. We accordingly submit that sustainable development is concerned with evolving and sustaining that kind of development that engenders environmental and intergenerational justice vis-à-vis meeting present and future needs.

Wellbeing: Understanding the Conceptual Interplay

Emergent from the above conceptualizations of the phenomena *history*, *philosophy* and *sustainable development* is an underlying interplay. First, standing alone, the three phenomena *history*, *philosophy* and *sustainable development* have underlying intellectual assumptions concerning well-being. History assumes for example that wellbeing is best understood against the background of making sense of past events, existences or experiences, among others. Philosophy on the other hand assumes that there is no appropriate sense of wellbeing in the absence of a critical understanding of the totality of existence - the meaning and purpose of existence in itself, for example. *Sustainable development* on its own part assumes wellbeing transcends past or present wellness or pleasure to include future pleasure, joy or satisfaction.

Deducible from the discursive analysis above is that between the stand-alone intellectual concerns of *history*, *philosophy* and *sustainable development* is an underlying but independent normative concern with wellbeing. The independent *wellbeing* concerns of *history*, *philosophy* and *sustainable development* is suggestive of a roadmap for an interdisciplinary approach to the quest for wellbeing: History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development. The interdisciplinarity characteristic of *History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development* (HPSD) shares intellectual affinity with the discipline *History and Philosophy of Science* (HPS) which became popular in the 19th century.

Today HPS is a discipline of interest to a wide spectrum of scholars and practitioners: philosophers, historians, scientists (including biotechnologists and data scientists), among others. With respect to the nature and interdisciplinarity of HPS, Patton (2014) declares for example: history of science without philosophy of science is blind ... philosophy of science without history of science is empty. Concerned essentially with the documentation and

interpretation of the critical thoughts or ideas that have shaped the growth and development of science and the scientific method, HPS continues to draw the intellectual attention of biologists, archeologists, sociologists and political scientists, among others.

The growing importance of the discipline HPS has engendered the establishment of Departments of History and Philosophy of Science in institutions of higher learning across the world. Departments of History and Philosophy of Science across the world have produced and continues to produce a workforce that appreciates the need to humanize science and technology; a workforce with requisite skills and competences to appreciate the history of science, the present state of science and, on that basis, able to shape the future of science. Not largely scientists qua scientists, historians and philosophers of science in the 21st century have impacted the science and technology space by helping humanity make sense of first, the documented past of science and, second the philosophic ideas behind the paradigm shifts in science.

Similarly, a study of HPSD as an academic discipline has the potential of honing human competencies and skills towards the pursuit of total wellbeing. At this juncture it is apposite to raise the following questions: what is it about the phenomenon *wellbeing* that makes it a subject of interest to history and historians? Why has *wellbeing* remained a perennially present discourse in philosophy? Why is it that *wellbeing* is the centerpiece of sustainable development? Should the concern with wellbeing be with respect to both humans and non-humans? Or should concerns for wellbeing be about humans and humans alone? In the final analysis, why should issues and challenges of wellbeing be the ultimate concern of HSPD.

Thematic Concerns of History and Philosophy of Sustainable Development

Now the plethora of questions surrounding wellbeing suggests, first that we conceptualize wellbeing. So, what is wellbeing? Before we attempt to answer the question, what wellbeing is it is important to note that the very question ‘what is wellbeing?’ constitute what may be referred to as the basic thematic concern of the emergent discipline HPSD. Every other thematic concern of HPSD derive from matters arising from the manner in which wellbeing is conceived.

The discipline concerned with the philosophical study of morality - ethics - is replete with a plethora of theories that have evolved over centuries of intellectual and practical concerns for the nature of wellbeing. Conceptualizing wellbeing, as the literature in Moral Philosophy illustrates is not as straightforward as the word suggests. There has emerged over the centuries a number of theories of wellbeing which are generally categorized into the hedonist-utilitarian theories; desire theories and the objective-list theories.

As variously noted by Fletcher (2016a, 2016b) and Alexandrova (2016) among others, hedonists are of the opinion that human beings always act in pursuit of what they think will give them the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. An intellectual position that dates back to Socrates (c. 470-399 BC) through Epicurus (c. 341-270) to Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832),

recent variants of hedonism - ‘evaluative hedonism’ or ‘prudential hedonism’ - hold that well-being consists in the greatest balance of pleasure over pain.

Against the dictates of hedonistic theories of wellbeing, desire theorists opine that wellbeing consists in the satisfaction of preferences or desires. Desire theories of wellbeing are grounded in welfare economics, which holds that the content of the satisfaction of Mr. X is revealed in the way Mr. X ranks his preferences and the choices that Mr. X makes. Contra the hedonist and desire theories of wellbeing, objective list theories identify and list items constituting well-being, the content of which are neither in mere pleasurable terms nor in terms of desire-satisfaction. Knowledge and friendship are paradigmatic of those items that the objective list theories will place, for example, on the moral list.

Now with respect to the question of sustainable development, each of the three broad theories of wellbeing will approach sustainable development from their respective ethical standards or moral philosophies. Thus, also central to the thematic concern of an emergent HPSD is the study of ethics and the study of theories of wellbeing in particular. Sustainable development in several ways has intellectual affinities with the ethical postulations of hedonist-utilitarianism, welfare-economist desire theories and objective list theories.

Now, and most importantly, the paper considers the question of sustainable development, wellbeing and biodiversity. The question as it arises here is: should wellbeing be considered in terms of the wellness of humans alone? Or put in another way: does human wellbeing translate to ecological wellbeing - the wellbeing of the various life beings in the ecosystem? Does human welfare translate to sustainable development? What is the nexus between human welfare and sustainable development? Now just as it is when we considered the ethical dimensions of wellbeing, the question of the nexus between human welfare and sustainable development is capable of generating a number of theories.

For the purposes of the objectives of its aim, the paper at this juncture identifies two possible theories that explain the nature of the nexus between Human Welfare and Sustainable Development (HWSD): the hominoidea and ecocentric theories of human welfare and sustainable development. Now an hominoidea theory of HWSD will define wellbeing in terms of the utilities (or benefits) derivable to man (or hominoids) from the pursuit of any line of individual or collective action. From the hominoidea HWSD point of view then, an action contributes to human welfare to the extent to which it promotes human interest (happiness, joy and satisfaction, among others); man, and not necessarily the environment is the ultimate phenomenon for consideration in effecting any line of action. An ecocentric theory of HWSD on the other hand sees human welfare as grounded, in the ultimate, in the wellness or *well-beingness* of the ecosystem. Thus, for the ecocentric theory of human welfare an action contributes to the wellbeing of humans if it derives from a consideration of the wellness or *well-beingness* of the ecosystem.

At this juncture the paper proceeds to analytically assess hominoidea and ecocentric theories of human welfare and sustainable development. Looked at superficially, the hominoidea theory - which grounds wellbeing in human welfare - appears superficially reasonable: after

all, it is only that category of species called hominoids (or *man*) that is of utmost importance. The danger in the hominoidea theory of explanation, however, is that it fails to take into cognizance the wellbeing of other species or life beings in the ecosystem. Man lives in a *biodiversed* environment that consists of varied life-forms. The hominoidea theory of wellbeing commits to some kind of speciesism - which like racism is discriminatory and morally wrong. Speaking ratiocinatively, we deduce that the hominoidea theory of wellbeing is not supportive of sustainable development, as conceived. Care of the totality of the environment - in the real sense, the conservation and preservation of biodiversity is one of the central principles of sustainable development.

The paper now considers the ecocentric theory of wellness. The ecocentric theory of wellness, as conceived, places the ecosystem at the center of wellness. Implicit in the ecocentric conception of wellness is a concern for the wellbeing of the totality of the diverse bios (or life forms or biodiversities) in the ecosystem. Thus an ecocentric theory of wellness grounds human welfare, in the ultimate, in the wellness or wellbeing of a variety of species on both the animal list (hominoids and anthropoids among others) and the plant list (flowering plants and mosses, among others). The ecocentric theory of wellbeing recognizes that to be environmentally just, man must use the environment in such a manner that respects the rights of other species - human and non-human - to the natural environment. Environmental justice is engendered when species like monkeys, orangutans and chimpanzees, alongside humans, feel safe - or have a sense of wellbeing - in the ecosystem.

Wellbeing then, from the perspective of an ecocentric theory of wellness is global and not speciest (or *specied*): wellbeing is not just about human welfare but about global environmental welfare; wellbeing is about sustainable development; and sustainable development is about global *utilities*, global *desires* and global *objectives* (of friendship and knowledge, among others). Thus, we say ecocentric theory of wellness is supportive of sustainable development. Furthermore, and as unarguably posited by Mikulčić et. al. (2016), human welfare is best supported by pursuit of sustainable development.

Conclusion

The foregoing analytical concern for interdisciplinary approach to the question of, and quest for, sustainable development is suggestive of the fact that sustainable development is best grounded within the context of an appropriate *wellbeing* or *wellness* framework, an ecocentric framework. The ecocentric view of wellbeing - the view that places the wellness of the ecosystem as the ultimate wellbeing - is supportive of global wellness in terms of engendering environmental justice and promoting sustainable development.

Deducible from this piece of exercise in the emergent interdisciplinary field of HPSD is the fact that the implicit interdisciplinarity of HPSD has the benefits of deepening human and global understanding of the imperatives of sustainable development in the 21st century and beyond. To the extent that human wellbeing is itself dependent on the wellbeing of the ecosystem - which sustainable development engenders - it becomes almost imperative to

encourage the teaching and learning of HPSD across disciplines as a tool for expanding the frontiers of knowledge about sustainable development.

Thus, there is the desideratum to include in the curricular of disciplines across tertiary institutions the teaching and learning of HPSD as a veritable platform for engaging and equipping scholars with the historico-philosophical foundations of sustainable development. Any scholarship - science, humanities or social science - that lacks concern for human wellbeing and sustainable development - is empty and idling. The development of a workforce that appreciates the place of history and philosophy in wellbeing remains a desideratum for sustainable development. Against the background of the fact that a deepened understanding of sustainable development is heuristic to global wellness, we declare - *a la* Socratic epigram - 'man, deepen sustainable development'.

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