Twenty Open Questions to Prompt and Perpetuate Sustainability Culture

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Abstract

In this Critical Reflection, twenty open questions relating to sustainability are presented and discussed. It is suggested that asking, answering, and then acting upon the answers to these questions is essential to both prompt and perpetuate Sustainability Culture. The process is undertaken with no expectation about what answers will emerge, but rather answers emerge through examining individual and group assumptions, beliefs, and values. A number of worldviews, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical distinctions are discussed. In conclusion individual and group action are briefly considered.

Keywords: **sustainability culture; sentiocentrism; anthropocentrism; intrinsic value; instrumental value; objective value; pragmatic ought; moral ought**

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Introduction: The Twenty Questions

Socrates asserted that an unexamined life is not worth living (**Plato, 1966: 38a**). Motivated by Socrates, here I assert that an unexamined endorsement and pursuit of 'sustainability' is not itself sustainable. A balance must perpetually be maintained between practically living 'sustainably' and critically examining what 'sustainability' means.

More recently, Mill asserted that:

> *the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind* (**Mill, 2011: 37**).

And that:

> *However unwillingly a person who has a strong opinion may admit the possibility that [their] opinion may be false, [they] ought to be moved by the consideration that however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth* (**Mill, 2011: 64**).

Motivated by Mill, here I assert that without full frequent and fearless discussion of one's own understanding of 'sustainability' one risks that understanding becoming 'a dead dogma' and not 'a living truth'.

Here I present twenty questions that can be asked, answered, and acted upon in perpetuity. The asking and answering of these questions is, I claim, a necessary feature of any Sustainability Culture. After I present the questions, I discuss how to apply them. Then I introduce worldviews conceptual frameworks and philosophical distinctions to illustrate what might inform the answers to the questions. Finally, I discuss how answers to the twenty questions can be acted upon both individually and collectively.

What Sustainability Culture looks like now will not be what it looks like in one thousand years or ten thousand years. Human cultures must perpetually critically reflect upon what sustainability means. The questions found below (see Table 1) can provide a framework to explore what 'sustainability' means. They are completely open questions. There should be no expectations about how this process unfolds nor any constraints upon what subjects are considered. However, a useful starting point is to assume each column is concerned with the same subject, and that the subjects of each of the four columns may (or may not) have some relationship amongst them. One possibility is to pick a 'what' question and then move down the same column and follow a similar pattern in other parts of the table.

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Table 1: The Twenty Open Questions.[i]

20 Qs	Is	Is not	Ought	Ought not
What…	What is being sustained?	What is not being sustained?	What ought to be sustained?	What ought not to be sustained?
Why …	Why is it being sustained?	Why is it not being sustained?	Why ought it to be sustained?	Why ought it not to be sustained?
Who …	Who/what is doing the sustaining?	Who/what is not doing the sustaining?	Who/what ought to be doing the sustaining?	Who/what ought not be doing the sustaining?
Whom …	For whom/what is it being sustained?	For whom/what is it not being sustained?	For whom/what ought it to be sustained?	For whom/what ought it not to be sustained?
How …	How is it being sustained?	How is it not being sustained?	How ought it to be sustained?	How ought it not to be sustained?[1]

Another option is to pick any question anywhere in the table and answer that question simply because that is the most salient question for the individual person or group of people undertaking the process. Having reflected upon one question, other issues may emerge as a direct result of that reflection, and a different question in a completely different part of the table becomes the focus of reflection. These questions serve to prompt reflection, but importantly they are not meant to set any boundary on such reflection.

Sometimes there may be a lack of agreement between answers to related questions such as 'What is being sustained?' and 'What ought to be sustained' or between 'What is not being sustained?' and 'What ought not to be sustained?' At other times there may be a harmony. At yet other times, answers to these questions lead to exploration at the 'why' and 'how' levels of the table that take the analysis in a completely new direction. Importantly, the answers to questions given at one point in the process may be replaced by completely different answers at some later point. Indeed, one may find that one answer prompts a total re-examination of previous answers such that many, or all, are discarded and the process begins again.

The point is that the analysis uncovers new ways of thinking and new ways of engaging with sustainability. This process can be undertaken at any scale, on any topic, and at any time in the future. Importantly, in such reflection, there should be no expectation about what answers will emerge. What 'sustainability' means for any individual or group of people will emerge out of critical reflection on the context, assumptions, perspectives, experiences, and values of that individual or group of people. Any person or group will begin the process from a different starting point. But the value of the process is to facilitate appropriate conceptual change.

The perpetual asking and answering of these questions allows for the answers (and the actions that follow from the answers) to change over time, such that the start point and the end point of each iteration of the process can change over time, reflecting the changing conditions of humans.

Part of the process of asking and answering the twenty questions involves critical examination of the type of 'ought' answers being explored. There are several ways the word 'ought' can be understood. For example, is it a 'moral ought' or (merely?) a 'pragmatic ought'? A pragmatic 'ought' relates to some pragmatic relationship between X and Y. If one wants Y and in order to get Y one must do X, then pragmatically one ought do X. But if one does not want Y, there is no pragmatic implication about X. And this pragmatic 'ought' may hold in relation to 'merely' personal prefences (say), rather than anything more consequential.

A 'moral ought', however, is one that has moral meaning and should be understood as such (a full metaethical analysis of the nature and status of 'moral oughts' is beyond the scope of this discussion). When considering answers to the 'ought' and 'ought not' questions it is important to determine the (1) nature of the 'oughts' that are being considered and (2) the appropriate attitude toward them.

There are many ways that the concept 'sustainability' can be understood. It can vary over time (particularly over long periods of time), and across cultures. Consider for example the five periods of culture ecology suggested by Thompson (**1989**) and used by Simmons (**1993**): Hunter-gatherer and early agriculture; Riverine Civilisations (e.g., Mesopotamia, Ancient China, and Egypt); Agricultural Empires (e.g., the Roman Empire); The Atlantic-industrial era (i.e., the Industrial Revolution); and the Pacific-global era (i.e., the era beginning in the late twentieth century). I suggest that the concept 'sustainability' varies across these forms of cultural ecology. Furthermore, the concept varies across different parts of the world, for example, between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South'. What is understood by the term 'sustainability' or 'sustainable' varies greatly across human cultures and ages.

Now recall Mill's distinction between 'dead dogma' and 'living truth'. Without full, frequent, and fearless discussion (or Socratic examination), one's understanding of sustainability may become misplaced, inapproiate, or impractical over time. To illustrate this, consider an example offered by Partridge (**2001: 385**). Before the fossil fuel era whale oil was used for lighting (in oil lamps) and lubrication (in machines). In the pre-fossil fuel era, in the minds of people acting out of a sense of duty to future generations, the initial answer to the question 'What ought to be sustained?' may have been 'sufficient reserves of whale oil to meet the

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needs of future generations'. But having undertaken a process of critical reflection using the twenty questions, they might have subsequently answered 'sufficient reserves of *energy* and resources to meet the needs of future generations'. And then they would be conceptually open to searching for a different, practical answer (unrelated to whale oil) that corresponded to this reconceptualisation.

Alternatively, consider a person or group of people discussing the healthcare system by asking and answering the twenty questions. The answer to 'What is being sustained?' might be a large, complex and centralised system. What is *not* being sustained might be flexible, responsive, and effective service delivery distributed across the community. Answering the 'why' and 'how' questions would shed further light on the challenges and opportunities of the healthcare system. For example, why are healthcare budgets predominantly directed to one set of health conditions (perhaps more common later in life) as opposed to some other set of health conditions (perhaps more common earlier in life)? Or why are healthcare budgets predominantly directed at cures rather than preventions?

Or consider a person or group of people discussing the transport system. What is being sustained? Perhaps the answer is large numbers of single-occupancy vehicle journeys. What is not being sustained? Perhaps the answer is large numbers of multiple-occupancy vehicle journeys. Again, answering 'why' and 'how' questions could shed further light on the challenges and opportunities of the transport system. For example, why are societies structured in such a way that vehicle journeys are required in the first place?

What Might Inform the Answers to the Twenty Questions?

Many things will affect how these questions are answered. The below review is by no means exhaustive; it merely illustrates the breadth of things that may affect the process.

Worldviews

The most fundamental thing that will affect how these questions are answered is the worldview of the individual or group answering them. Here, I follow van Inwagen (**2002: 3–4**) by firstly, using the term 'world' to denote everything that exists, and secondly, by characterising a worldview as answers to the following questions:

> 1. *What are the most general features of the World, and what sorts of things does it contain? What is the World like?*

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> 2. *Why does a World exist, and more specifically, why is there a World having the features and the contents described in the answer to Question 1?*
>
> 3. *What is our place in the World? How do we human beings fit into it?*

Over human history, different individuals and groups have answered these questions very differently.[ii] My point here is not to endorse one set of answers over another set. It is simply to note that the worldview a person or group holds will affect their process of answering the twenty questions.

Conceptual frameworks

A worldview is the most extensive 'view' one has of existence. As such, it can be considered as a single, unified conceptual framework. However, there are other conceptual frameworks that don't correspond to the scope of a worldview, but they are none-the-less worth examining here. Anthropocentrism is a conceptual framework that prioritizes human interests and purposes over the interests and purposes of all else. An example of a non-anthropocentric conceptual framework is Leopold's 'Land Ethic', which states that 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community' and 'wrong when it tends otherwise' (**1966: 262**). The non-anthropocentric nature of the Land Ethic is illustrated by Leopold's position that we should understand our species not as conqueror of the land but as a 'plain member and citizen of it' (**1966: 240**). Rather than being anthropocentric, the Land Ethic is biocentric.

Another example of a non-anthropocentric conceptual framework is sentiocentrism. Rather than placing all of the biotic community at the centre, sentiocentrism prioritizes the interests and purposes of sentient organisms. Singer, a proponent of this view, argues that it does not make sense to claim that non-sentient entities have interests and purposes:

> *If a tree is not sentient, then it makes no difference to the tree whether we chop it down or not. It may, of course, make a great difference to human beings, present or future, and to non-human animals who live in the tree, or in the forest of which it is a part. [...] Imaginatively, we can put ourselves in the place of [a] being, and ask: how would I like it if I were in that situation? This works for sentient beings, but it does not work for trees, species, or ecosystems. There is nothing that corresponds to what it is like to be an ecosystem flooded by a dam.* (**Singer, 2001: 419–421**).

Importantly, sentiocentrism does not prioritise humans over other sentient organisms.

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Instrumental values and intrinsic values

Implicit in Singer's argument quoted above is the theoretical distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values. Singer observes that it 'makes no difference to the tree whether we chop it down or not'. However, he goes on to say that cutting the tree down may make a lot of difference to human or non-human (sentient) animals who have some relationship to the tree. Perhaps the tree forms part of a non-human sentient animal's habitat or a human's livelihood depends on cutting this tree down. In both the cases of (1) the tree being part of a habitat and (2) the tree being a source of income, the tree has instrumental value. In such cases there may be tension between the two instrumental values, and often only one instrumental value can be retained. A tree used as habitat cannot be cut down, and a tree cut down cannot generally be retained as habitat.

Some entities have both instrumental value and intrinsic value. For example, each time I use a bus to go somewhere the bus driver is *instrumentally* valuable to me (for getting me where I'm going) but is also *intrinsically* valuable (as a person). This respect for the intrinsic value of humans is captured in Kant's Categorical Imperative: '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' (**Kant, 2018: 42**). Thus, I should treat the bus driver not only as a means to get me to my destination, but also as an end in themselves.

Being 'an end in itself' is not the only way to understand the 'intrinsically valuable' (see **O'Neill 2001** for further analysis and distinctions), but it is important because it highlights the relation between the concept of intrinsic value and ethical standing. The power of Kant's Categorical Imperative rests on the assumption that humans are ends in themselves and thus have ethical standing. For Kant (**2018**) this ethical standing arises from the nature of humans as rational and autonomous beings. But this is not the only way to understand ethical standing that may arise out of intrinsic value. Another way to understand intrinsic value is in terms of objective value, and it may be that entities that are objectively valuable also have ethical standing (**O'Neill 2001**).

Objective value is an important but contested concept in metaethics. Mackie (**1977: 15**) characterises objective value as 'value that an object possesses independently from the valuations of valuers'. But not everyone accepts the existence of such objective values (including Mackie himself). In order to explore the concept of objective value Mackie asks the question 'What would objective values be like if they existed?'. He answers:

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> *Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it.* (**1977: 40**).

The relation between objective value and ethical standing is made explicit in the final sentence in the passage quoted above. Consider the possibility that an ecosystem was objectively valuable, if so then (to use Mackie characterisation of objective value, even though he does not endorse it) destroying the ecosystem would have a 'not-to-be-doneness' built into it. A fundamental challenge is to understand how to know if there are objective values. But addressing this challenge takes us well beyond the scope of this discussion. However, I hope that this brief analysis gives some sense of how worldviews, conceptual frameworks, theoretical distinctions, beliefs, and values will be relevant when people answer the twenty questions.

Conclusion

Some might choose to answer these twenty questions individually and then seek to act on them individually to the extent they are able to, given their personal agency and the resources at their disposal. Some might answer these questions collectively and then act on those answers as a group, for instance, through political action. How different groups act politically will depend on the socio-political realities of their time and place. Consider for a moment all the different forms of political reality that have existed over the past ten thousand years. Now try to imagine all the forms of political reality that may exist over the next ten thousand. While people can engage in political activity most openly within liberal democracies, it is important to note that such a system might not exist in perpetuity. At any point in the future of human existence these questions can and should be considered within any number of imagined—or as-yet-imagined—realities. [iii]

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Acknowledgements

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[i] Admittedly some of these questions are phrased awkwardly, but the phrasing is kept uniform across all questions for simplicity and ease of recall. With respect to the meaning of the question 'How ought it not to be sustained?' this question means 'How should it be ensured that this is not sustained?'. With respect to the meaning of the question 'For whom/what is it not being sustained?' this question means 'Who or what is causing it not to be sustained, or who/what has an interest in it not being sustained?'. With respect to the meaning of the question 'For whom/what ought it not to be sustained?' this question means 'Who or what benefits from the alternate state of affairs in which it is not sustained?' or 'If it were the case that it is not sustained, who or what benefits?'

[ii] Other worldviews include traditional Indigenous worldviews (**Whitt et al., 2001**), worldviews from Classical China (**Lai, 2001**), Classical Theism (**Attfield, 2001; Haq, 2001; Katz, 2001**), and a range of Western philosophical positions from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, including Idealism and Naturalism (**Brennan, 2001**). See Jamieson (**2001**) for more.

[iii] The following video links are relevant to both the twenty questions process and to prompting and perpetuating Sustainability Culture more generally: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EQgMPQFHHo; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELQSMGcdEVg.

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