



Beyond Sustainability: The Emergence of a Sustainable World

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Introduction

We seek to find common ground in the concept of sustainability, assuming that as our intent is to act for the wider benefit of all, we share a common goal. However, when we enquire behind the question of what it is we seek to sustain, we find significant diversity.

On realizing that we are working together to create a sustainable world, but with a different plan, we wonder what *'we'* are really doing. By using the principles of emergence we can discover where mankind is going as a whole, to take us *beyond* sustainability, to where a natural future suggests we will be.

Sustainability Concepts

Sustainability is primarily a values based concept, shared collectively, internalised personally, manifested socially and experienced physically. In integral theory terms, it manifests in all four quadrants, operating and being interpreted at many levels of meaning.

Varey (2004a, 2004b) invites us to develop a personal definition of sustainability as individuals to give definition to our intention. In doing so we focus on our sustainability concerns within the Upper Left (UL) quadrant of internal consciousness as described by Ken Wilber's integral theory (Wilber 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001).

Within the frame of this personal definition we are asked the question *"What do you want to sustain, for whom and for how long?"* acknowledging that sustainability may be about our own basic needs, a way of life, control over resources, an existing social order, a position of economic advantage, community values, the future of humanity

or the future of the global biosphere as a whole; the answer depending on the consciousness and personal values of the inquirer.

Sustainability can be about all of these things. It can also be about those things now and in the future, on different future timescales (Varey 2004a). Whatever the definition chosen, the concept of sustainability is one that is personal and is about sustaining '*what we desire to have*' for self and others because those things are already meaningful and valuable to us. It presumes that there is something to sustain, which leads us to a critical question. Is only the individual stance relevant, or is sustainability a question that we as individuals must eventually experience and answer collectively?

As we presently all exist within the same global physical environment (Upper-Right) as members of inter-dependent macro-economic, social and ecological systems (Lower-Right) we must also move our inquiry into the domain of the collective and inter-subjective (Lower-Left), as the answer adopted by any one individual, affects us all.

The Critical Question

Like all debates involving values based concepts, the discourse on sustainability is around one central question, accessed at different levels of consciousness, the answer to which is in essence the same at its core, although confused in the myriad of its expressions. When we shift our focus to the Lower Left (LL) quadrant of mutual understanding to examine this shared question, that each of us has asked as individuals (at various levels) we often find ourselves with no clarity as to the question and no answers, only different presently held personal views.

The work of David Bohm (1980, 1990, 1994) on dialogue theory provides us with a way to move to an understanding beyond the personal view, finding within shared meaning the implicate order and making explicit the flow of wholeness beyond self. In undertaking such Dialogues on sustainability the critical question that often emerges from the collective is simply stated as - "Will we make it?".

This same question is central to each person's individual enquiry, and also the collective enquiry, of our sustainability. It has a profound scope of depth – and hence why it surfaces as the central core. The perspective that differs in each case in the individual answers to the question is the perspective on the 'we'.

A progression of levels of concern for the 'we' increasing in span is described by Wilber (2000) as 'me', 'us', 'all of us', 'all earthly beings without exception', 'all sentient beings of any realm' and 'all manifest and unmanifest reality' (with

graduations in between). However, the critical question remains irrespective of the span, when we look at its core.

The Core of Sustainability

In answering this critical question our concern around sustainability is in the preservation of the present for the future. There is something that we, individually and collectively, presently have, either in physical form or represented by a deeply held value, that we want to sustain.

Do we seek to sustain the intrinsic value of biodiversity; the ability of social progress to alleviate suffering; the freedom of human endeavour to become; or the right of existing structures to be? It is often not only the material tangibles we hold onto, but also the intangible conceptions of value that are represented for us in the meta-physical, that form the core of what we seek to sustain.

Sustainability then becomes a conceptualisation around personal values, deeply held. In defining these personal values we take what we value from the world and make it into a conceptual virtue to which each of us aspires. However, within this we miss an essential point, without the acknowledgement of which we will never achieve a sustainable world.

The Integral Tenets of Emergence

To assist us in the conceptual management of integral holarchies and to enable us to understand the universal principles of emergence, Wilber (1995) identifies the laws, patterns, tendencies or habits that all holons have in common when they interact. By applying these tenets of integral emergence to the human conceptualisation of its own future existence, held individually and expressed collectively, we are able to see beyond the sustainability of what presently 'is', to the next emergence of what 'will be'.

To do this we must engage in an integral inquiry into sustainability as it manifests as a concept within the holon of humanity as a whole. This perspective is sustainability not as an expression of human values, but as humanity's values. Through the aggregation of the individual expressions of valued existence, triggered by the threats to an environmentally constraining world, that is interconnected in all its environmental systems, we find the collective convergence of values – as a single expression in the collective of the whole.

Wilber's 20 tenets are described in twelve categories, each of which is relevant to an integral analysis of the dynamics of emergence in any holon. An inquiry into the

holon that manifests the entirety of human values around sustainability can theoretically be examined in the same way to the extent that integral theory is a complete and open system of inquiry. The 20 tenets provide us with an understanding of our own emergence as a species by an examination of the conceptual evolution of our conceptualization of sustainability as the desired expression of our own existence.

The process of inquiry in this essay as a result does not look at the manifestation of sustainability from the perspective of any single individual holon, but at the resulting phenomena of sustainability perspectives as manifested by *all* individual holons collectively. Sustainability then is the concept that centres the question for us. Seeing the resultant set of dynamics in emergence that manifests from that inquiry allows us to view the concept manifested in the holon's emergence in its entirety. This process recognises the theoretical extension of integral theory to the collective of humanity. The concept of sustainability therefore points us to the holon of humanity enacted.

The Application of the Tenets

Each category within the 20 tenets reveals a part truth in turn:

Category 1: Reality as a whole is not composed of things or processes, but of holons. We have already noted that *sustainability* while often talked about as a 'thing' or a process can in fact be seen as the resultant phenomena of a conceptual holon in emergence – as a manifestation of a whole reality in four quadrants. It becomes the concept that is the manifestation of humanity's desire for a future and a valuing of its present existence based on its past. While atoms, molecules and rocks manifest in the physiosphere (in all quadrants) sustainability manifests in the noosphere, and is itself made up of other conceptual holons (i.e. economics). Accepting the first tenet allows us to discuss the whole of sustainability as a conceptual artefact of humanity rather than merely examining indefinitely the inherent conflicts in its existing parts. This takes us beyond sustainability (recognising its place in a bigger scenario of human values and human emergence as a whole).

Category 2: Holons display four fundamental capacities: self-preservation, self-adaptation, self-transcendence, and self-dissolution. Firstly we recognise the manifestations of agency and communion within the holon of humanity within the many conceptions of sustainability. For higher order values to emerge, sustainable existence cannot simply be limited to self-adaptation by alignment of the smaller parts with larger wholes, but must also involve at some stage self-transcendence of all these values into a new whole. For this to occur the holons that make up humanity itself, as the aggregate of its parts, must self-dissolve into a higher order form. At the highest

level, the collection of the whole of the human concepts of sustainability must, by definition, then represent something that is *beyond* sustainability.

Category 3: Holons emerge. If the holon of human values is to 'go beyond' itself by self-transcendence, this will occur as a process of emergence. Wilber (1995) notes in quoting Varela (et.al.) that emergence is neither a rare nor isolated phenomenon and "In fact, it seems difficult for any densely connected aggregate to escape emergent properties.". The human system is one such densely connected aggregate (albeit at present slightly disconnected).

Category 4: Holons emerge holarchically. In a heterarchical flatland which is both a floor and ceiling – there may be no emergence – which will lead back to self-dissolution. If we are to escape this - the only way is up.

Category 5: Each emergent holon transcends and includes its predecessor(s). Transcendence through self-transformation is not to be feared. Nothing is lost, not even identity, only the creation of the new. Human values around sustainability are not lost if we go beyond sustainability. We simply find and see more of our own humanity.

Category 6: The lower sets the possibilities of the higher; the higher sets the possibilities of the lower. Our past, reflected in the present, guides our future. Having achieved a degree of sustainability, in survival terms, for part of humanity we can see the possibilities for this level of survival for all humanity. We also understand from the second proposition that the path to a sustainable world, is to actually have a sustainable world (where the whole field at its highest level influences all other parts in alignment below).

Category 7: The number of levels which a hierarchy comprises determines whether it is shallow or deep; and the number of holons on any given level we shall call its span. Koestler's definitions (Wilber 1995) help us understand that in a span of human values that encompasses the "one-1" – there is no loss of depth already attained. A wider concept of sustainability that is held by all (i.e. a span of one), must include, by definition, all other concepts of sustainability. On this basis it is possible to have 'one' definition of sustainability reflecting that held by humanity in its entirety.

Category 8: Each successive level of evolution produces greater depth and less span. With depth comes greater consciousness in levels and with multiple levels, precariousness. The stage before the emergence of the highest level that becomes a span of 'one' will be precarious in the extreme.

Category 9: Destroy any type of holon, and you will destroy all of the holons above it and none of the holons below it. In sustaining sustainability we must not destroy any lower holons. For example, failing to sustain the biosphere has significant impacts for the

noosphere (the collective consciousness). The imperative to 'save the planet' is a diversion to us – for the lithosphere is fine, it is we and the many species we depend on, that are presently at risk.

Category 10: Holarchies co-evolve. In understanding that co-evolution is ecological we understand that we are not alone. The simplest way to assist the emergence of all living things is to assist the emergence and sustainability of humanity as a living thing. The simplest way of enabling the emergence of our own social holon is to allow for our own individual and collective emergence - because all agency is always in communion. A healthy humanity can then theoretically co-exist with the healthy collectives of all other sentients.

Category 11: The micro is in relational exchange with the macro at all levels of its depth. By this tenet we understand the immensity of the complexity and the imperative we must embrace to continue to exist, as we are in relational exchange with all other holons at all depths - in the physical environment, biological environments and in our cultural and symbolic mental environments. There is a lot to do and manage, and doing this consciously as 'one' in the macro-social is difficult, but simply logical when this exchange is seen as a 'whole' set of problems. Our greatest difficulty then is to 'see' ourselves as one whole (in all its parts).

Category 12: Evolution has directionality - a. Increasing complexity, b. Increasing differentiation/integration, c. Increasing organisation/structuration, d. Increasing relative autonomy, e. Increasing telos.

We understand that the direction of evolution towards increasing complexity is a natural process. From this we see that as human values increase in differentiation, but so do the forces of integration. Evolution also tells us that as systems become more complex they attain a higher level of organisation – and in terms of the sustainability of humanity, that we have not yet found our highest level.

We also understand that with greater depth comes, not only autonomy, but more importantly, greater resilience of existence (but only to the extent the emergent complexity finds integration, and does not instead create dissociation and a pathology of the whole).

Finally, directionality is defined by the increasing pull of ultimate potential, the eros of the Kosmos, which by the process of emergence will simply be made actual. For while there are clear human values held by the individuals that make up mankind, the *telos* potential is to find the convergence of human values that are shared by humanity as a whole.

In understanding the holon that we are, the complexity we hold, the forces of differentiation, the wholeness in integration, our inter-relationship at depth and our convergence in an emergent span, we see more about our future than our past can ever reveal.

The Emergent Next Step

The 20 tenets in providing a holarchical analysis of our present indicate our future. In this we understand that we do not need to know the final potential, or the ultimate end point for humanity's development as from the 20 tenets we can see the next natural point of emergence and the emergent step we need to take if we are to be 'sustainable'. The word 'sustainability' is then not meaningless by its multiplicity, but is made meaningful because of the tension it creates by the inclusion of so much within that complexity.

The future, the emergent next step, is simply that man as a species is destined to become the new species of humanity by a process of natural emergence. This will occur with the emergence of its understanding of its own future – and its own existence. Such is our evolutionary path. In this emergence, which will require a transcendence of that which we are, is also the inclusion of all that presently is.

When we look at the central question: "Will we make it?" our primary focus is often the survivability of ourselves and for those whom we care. We do not initially see that when the 'we' has become the 'one' - sustainability is really about '*survivability*' of 'all'. A necessary sequence of: emergence, wholeness, convergence, has not yet been completed for us.

We are not yet able to see ourselves and our own future as an 'all'. The existence of 'sustainability' as a concept of pluralistic complexity tells us this each day. We seek to sustain only the parts.

Whether mankind makes the transition to become 'a humanity' as a natural process of emergence will be dependent on our ability to relinquish our present presumption of existence, and the acceptance of the wider concept of the future nature of global subsistence.

What we will discover is that responding to this next stage of '*survivability*' is much more important in terms of our eventual sustainability, than sustaining that which we presently value as individual holons. It is for this reason that we must eventually look '*beyond* sustainability' if '*we*' are going to make it.

A Letting Go

We often discuss sustainability as if it was a concept held in common, however, it is rare to experience a situation (other than in Dialogue space) where all the personally held internalisations and understandings of the concept of sustainability are, on enquiry, the same. Our individual existence means our self-cherishing finds in the limit space we each hold, something precious to hold onto.

Behind this depth of levels of understanding is an emergent potentiality for a conceptualisation of a concept that is the commonality of all '*sustainabilites*', held in common by a self-transcendence that includes all that is presently understood within a wider whole. To experience that wider whole requires a 'letting go' of that which is held prior to the point of emergence. In the words of Ken Wilber:

"We must shift our perspectives, deepen our perception, often against a great deal of resistance, to embrace the deeper and wider contexts. But for that reason, each time we identify a deeper context, our relative autonomy actually increases, because in identifying with a deeper perception, we have found a wider freedom." (Wilber 1995:73)

In this discovery of a new and deeper context and meaning we find that the concept of sustainability has an unspoken premise, that some 'dividuals' have already surpassed survival and need merely sustain this present state in a modified form, to progress.

When we open our hearts and our minds to a greater span of care what we discover is the wider community of man, the wider '*we*' – '*we*' have not yet surpassed survival. In our deep consciousness the critical question remains, such that when we ask "Will we make it?" – any answer that still permits an 'other' means some are excluded from the '*we*' – and (by definition) we won't.

While we continue to seek to sustain that which is – was - and will be – unsustainable, we cannot find sustainability. The enquiry and attempt in this, in all its forms will, however, lead us to the capacity for wholeness and the point of choice that then allows a 'letting go' of our own holding and a process of true convergence to begin.

The point at which this occurs is when the concept of sustainability is relinquished, and replaced by a new and deeper meaning. In this new and deeper meaning the health and wellbeing of humanity, being its *survivability*, of all the parts of the whole together as a '*one*', will become the concern that dominates.

Accretions of Consciousness

Because the emergence of humanity as a span of 'one' is an event that has not yet occurred, we do not at this stage have *that* thing to sustain. This is why when we refer to the term sustainability, and believe we mean it to refer to the whole of humanity, we refer to a concept that we as yet have no consciousness of. We use the words but do not collectively have a shared meaning of this.

The deepest fear that should possess any sustainability practitioner is that our present worldviews are sustained. The existent suffering at all levels of existence at present is not something that is, or can ever be, sustainable. Yet we seek that, we cherish it, we defend it, we desire it ... and we hope for it.

It is for this reason that the attainment of sustainability is, at the limits of our present conception, only the ability to sustain the ultimate potential for collective suffering. What this means is that in respect of the human race as a species, we have not reached the starting line, but have merely made it through the qualifying rounds.

However, the process of convergence does not begin with a clear signal, and in fact it has already started, it is just that no-one told us that the timekeeper's watch is already ticking. We are already part of an emergent process; one from which we try to continuously hide.

Teilhard de Chardin describes this best as:

"For those who can use their eyes nothing, not even the summit of our being, can escape this flux any longer, because it is only definable in accretions of consciousness." (1955:220)

The accretions of consciousness are a process of which we are part that has already begun. On realising that we are evolution that has become conscious of itself, 'the movement of our souls expresses and measures the very stages of progress of evolution itself' (Teilhard de Chardin 1955).

Conclusion

We understand the imperative of striving for sustainability. We respect existence and the process of emergence. We know that through differentiation comes integration and therefore respect all differences and seek within them wholeness and common truths.

We understand that which we hold is precious, and for this enduring value, we will do what ever it takes to develop our ability to sustain this, for all for whom we care.

However, we also see ourselves as whole/parts, but not as parts of the whole. The 'we' we see ourselves as, has not yet begun to be.

The ability we seek to sustain is the capacity to keep asking and answering the critical question, "Will we make it?".

While the 'we' means the 'some' this is an answer we cannot sustain indefinitely. For those who can use their eyes, we can then begin to see, that to accomplish the sustainability of the all, we must go '*beyond sustainability*'.

In doing this we will find the answer to our deepest desire, leaving behind sustainability and attaining for the 'all' the *survivability* of the 'one'. It is this that we must do if we are to attain a truly sustainable world and move beyond subsistence towards a sustained global existence.

When this happens, we cannot say. All we need to know is it is happening now.

And at the moment of the great 'letting go', it will begin to be ...

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Bio

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