

## Presentation by Dr Robert Traer at the Washington DC GLTE

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### Ethical Arguments for Sustainable Consumption

To halt global warming due to climate change we must reduce carbon emissions. This involves increasing our use of renewable energy sources and decreasing our dependence on fossil fuels. For business and government, it means creating policies and investing in the research and development necessary for low-carbon innovation and sustainable growth. The economic and political goal is to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

From the perspective of ethics, this is a utilitarian argument that involves *predicting consequences* to clarify what actions are best. Good results depend on accurate predictions, which require knowing the risks and costs of a possible action before taking it. Yet, when the consequences are long-term and we know very little about the variables, as with climate change, our predictions will be uncertain. Therefore, other ethical arguments become more important.

These include assertions of moral *duties* and human *rights*, which do not rely for their justification on predicting consequences.

With respect to climate change, corporate and public policies affirm a moral duty to future generations to care for the earth. The Golden Rule, which says we should “do unto others as we would have them do unto us,” offers a reason for this duty. If we agree that our ancestors should have lived with concern for us, then we should accept a duty of concern for future generations.

Another reason for affirming our duty to care for the earth is offered by Christians, Muslims and Jews for they read in their scriptures that God has given this obligation to all human beings. In addition, Hindus accept a duty to respect the lives of animals, and fulfilling this duty improves their karma. Similarly, Buddhists vow to act with compassion for all sentient beings.

We also find in international law a duty, affirmed both for societies and individuals, to protect human rights, which include the right of every people to environmentally sustainable development, and the human right of each person to a healthy environment. These human rights and duties are affirmed by Agenda 21 and UN Millennium Goals, as well as by many corporate and government policies. Of course, businesses and states vary considerably in their efforts to live up to these moral aspirations.

Ethical arguments concerning duties and rights give reasons for taking an action, but do not rely on predicting consequences. Duties are understood to be just, and human rights to be necessary for human dignity. Our duty to future generations does not require a likely prediction that acting on this duty will make life better for our descendants, although most of those who accept this duty probably think this will be a result. Our duty to protect human rights may not be cost effective, but nonetheless is affirmed as our moral responsibility.

Arguments for duty and rights check the dangers of utilitarian reasoning, when it is taken to mean “the end justifies the means.” If consequences are all that matters, duties may be neglected and rights violated. Good decisions are more likely when we presume we should do our duty and protect human rights, and then test this presumption by predicting the likely consequences of acting on it.

Ethical decision-making also involves valuing *relationships* and *character* as well as moral actions and positive outcomes. Traditional ethics identifies the moral importance of our relationships as the

common good or the public welfare, but our knowledge of life on earth now requires expanding our concern to include other species. For all life depends on ecosystems, which involve multiple species in symbiotic relationships. The biosphere of the earth an ecosystem, and also each of us is an ecosystem. More than half the cells in our bodies and on our skin are other organisms, which contribute to our health as they live off our bodies. We depend not only on our environment, but on the microorganisms that depend on us as their environment.

All life has evolved in complex, diverse and resilient ecosystems with emergent properties that are irreplaceable. The wonder that “we live and move and have our being” in God (Acts 17:28) applies as well to these natural relationships. To live sustainably, we must learn from and mimic ecosystems.

What might this mean for how we produce food and manufacture goods? *Food* production in nature relies on solar energy, maintains fertility by cycling nutrients, and resists drought and pests through biodiversity. In contrast, our industrial model of farming and raising livestock uses an average of 20 calories from fossil fuels to produce 1 calorie of food energy – and the ratio for beef is 55 to 1.

By separating livestock from farming, industrial agriculture has replaced nature’s ecosystem – of raising animals on fields to nourish both – with two environmental disasters. Meat is produced in *CAFOs* (confined animal feeding operations) that generate 20% of our greenhouse gas emissions and also liquid and solid waste containing steroids and pharmaceuticals. In *fields* never fertilized by animals, crops require artificial fertilizer, but as much as 60% is not taken up by the plants before runoff drains it from the fields into streams – causing eutrophication in our lakes and oceans.

To be sustainable, agriculture must mimic ecosystems by rotating livestock and cultivation, relying on cover crops to hold the soil, using biodiversity to resist losses due to drought and pests, and minimizing tillage that releases carbon from the soil into the atmosphere.

*Manufacturing* should also be modeled on the circular metabolism of nature. After applying an ecosystem approach to making carpets, Interface reported savings in 2007 of 45% in fossil fuel use, 30% in water use, and 80% less land fill waste – even as profits rose 49%. To encourage sustainable manufacturing, the company supports changes in tax laws that will “shift taxation away from economic and social benefits (labor, income and investment) to detriments (pollution, waste and the loss of primary resources).” Achieving a sustainable economy will require taxing bads, not goods.

Product design as well should reflect a life cycle analysis. William McDonough and Michael Braungart propose that “consumables” – meaning products made out of “biological nutrients” – should be designed “to go back to the soil,” whereas “durables” – made from what they call “technical nutrients” – should be designed to be reused and recycled. They suggest durables be licensed rather than sold, so producers will be motivated to recycle and reuse materials. And they have designed buildings to mimic the way a tree – as an ecosystem – purifies the air, enriches the soil, creates shade and habitat, and returns energy to the environment.

We can, and we should, conceive of manufacturing as industrial ecology, of cities as granite gardens, and of “business as usual” as sustaining a green economy.

Finally, *character* matters as much as taking the right action and achieving good consequences. We have evolved to make ethical decisions based on empathy as well as reason. We each have mirror neurons in our brains that produce in us the feelings we see in the faces of others. We are motivated more by inspiration than by information. Virtues, such as integrity and frugality, make a difference.

Therefore, if we have hope, others are more likely to be hopeful. If we consume less, so those with less may have more, others are more apt to follow our example. If we are grateful for beluga whales and butterflies, and for the beauty of sea and sky, others will join us in caring for the earth.