

# Randall Curren and Ole Andreas Kvamme

## Preserving opportunities to live well: A conversation with Randall Curren on sustainability and education

Randall Curren is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the University of Rochester in upstate New York. In this position, Curren has for decades made substantial contributions to the fields of ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of education, Ancient Greek philosophy, and even moral psychology. Several of these interests converge around the issue of sustainability and education, a relationship Curren has examined for quite some time and which is explored in the following.

In 2009, Curren's assessment of the UNESCO strategy regarding education for sustainable development was published in the series of IMPACT pamphlets by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain<sup>1</sup> in which philosophers bring perspectives to bear on current education policy in the United Kingdom. A year later, Curren, along with numerous other philosophers and ethicists, contributed to the anthology *Sustainability Ethics: 5 Questions*.<sup>2</sup> Curren writes in that work that: "Sustainability is the defining challenge of our time and may continue to be for as long as human civilization survives"<sup>3</sup>; and "We've barely begun to conceptualize an ethic of sustainability. The questions that follow are an invitation to identify some of the starting points."<sup>4</sup> In 2017, Curren and his co-author, geologist Ellen Metzger, published *Living Well Now and in the Future: Why Sustainability Matters*,<sup>5</sup> which demonstrates how sustainability is an interdisciplinary challenge in several respects. This book also brings together many of Curren's persistent interests, including issues of ethics, justice, capabilities, and education, and demonstrates his concurrent engagement with Aristotelean and Kantian ethics.

The interview took place in Curren's office an afternoon in May 2018.

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1 Randall Curren, *Education for Sustainable Development: A Philosophical Assessment* (London: PESGB, *Impact Series*, 2009). Republished on-line: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/imp.2009.2009.issue-18/issuetoc> (Wiley Online Library, 2011).

2 Randall Curren, "5 Questions". In *Sustainability Ethics: 5 Questions*, eds. Ryne Raffaelle, Wade Robison and Evan Selinger, 71–83. (S.I.: Automatic Press, 2010).

3 Curren, «5 Questions», 71.

4 Curren, «5 Questions», 72.

5 Randall Curren and Ellen Metzger, *Living Well Now and in the Future. Why Sustainability Matters*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017).

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## Big lessons and hurricanes

Ole Andreas Kvamme (OK): You are a philosopher with a substantial engagement in both education and sustainability, neither of which are of particular concern to the majority of philosophers. So, let us begin there: What awakened your interest in education and sustainability issues, respectively?

Randall Curren (RC): The story of how I became interested in education goes back to when I was in high school. I was an editor of an unauthorized school newspaper and our first issue was devoted to critiques of the school. Sale of the paper was banned on the school grounds, but we sold out the entire print. All the teachers bought copies, and by the time I walked into my trigonometry class the teacher already had a copy on her desk. She told me she had read my essay. It was a critique of the testing practices of our school.

I had been reading Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, who had a famous partnership in the philosophy of mathematics. That led me to Whitehead's important early 20th century classic essay on the aims of education, which presented a theory of the cycle of learning, or three stages of learning. His view was that educators too often focus on what he called the stage of "precision," in which the student must master all of the complex details of a field. They tend to overlook the stage of "romance," in which the student becomes truly interested in the field and its central questions. Educators also tend to move on too quickly after the mastery of details. They don't leave time for the stage of "generalization," in which students should pause and think about what it all amounts to and what the general lessons are. Whitehead's belief was that most of what students remember into the future is not all the little details, but the big lessons and the way one sees the world through the perspective of the field. So I argued in my essay, in this unauthorized school paper, that the testing practices of our school halted our learning before we could get to the stage of generalization. It was a bad approach.

My reward for this was that my trigonometry teacher asked me to teach the entire week of class concerning something that is not taught any more: the slide rule. It was a kind of calculating device before there were electronic calculators. So, I taught the unit on the slide rule the way I thought it should be taught. The offer was not just to teach that unit, but also to set the exam and grade it. So in high school I was grading my fellow students.

OK: Were you guided to Russell or Whitehead by somebody?

RC: No. In my neighborhood we had a library and the summer before high school I was mostly reading math books from that library. A couple of them were very philosophical and I found them fascinating,

Then I attended an all-city high school across town, and where I changed buses there was a bookstore where I spent a lot of time. I discovered philosophy partly through reading physics and partly through stumbling into the philosophy section in that bookstore and making connections between the work of Russell and Whitehead and the mathematics I had been reading the previous summer. I had no teacher or parent who supported me in my emerging interest in philosophy.

The environmental part came much later, although I began reading in ecology even before I began reading philosophy. It was really because of the hurricanes Katrina and Rita flooding New Orleans, my hometown, that I began to embrace studies of sustainability as an aspect of my philosophical work. That was when these things came together for me.'

## The significance of cross-disciplinary collaboration

OK: Let us turn to the book *Living Well Now and in the Future: Why Sustainability Matters*, published in 2017 with your co-author, the geologist Ellen Metzger. In the foreword, you draw the reader's attention to this cross-disciplinary collaboration by stating, "A hard truth about sustainability is that it cannot be adequately addressed within the confines of any one discipline."<sup>6</sup> In the following, we will mainly be focusing on philosophical aspects of your work, but could you first comment on the impact this cross-disciplinary collaboration had on the framing of the book?

RC: I think anyone who reads the book perceives that we draw on several different disciplines. It draws on work in ecology and climatology, and very broadly on earth systems analysis. So that is where the natural science is. It also reflects some debates in the geoscience community, which has been very concerned in recent years with the public responsibility of scientists. If everything seems to be going pretty well in the world, it is enough to do your science well, get it published, and leave it to the public and to leaders and policy makers to figure out which of the science you have done is useful for addressing problems of public concern. But the geoscience community has now come to see that we are in a crisis, that we are living far beyond our means as a global human population. One big focus of concern is how scientists can better communicate to the public and to policy makers the seriousness of what we are seeing in the evidence about the changes in the planetary systems. Another focus is on how collaborative research can be more efficient in producing the knowledge we need to live more sustainably.

Besides the natural science, there is some institutional theory and economics, theories of governance, and psychology in the book. I think a lot of work on sustainability reflects the disciplinary stances or particular foci that people had before they began to think about sustainability. And for many philosophers, their orientation was in environmental ethics. Mine wasn't. I was a social and political philosopher, primarily.

OK: Finding a common language is often reported to be a major challenge when it comes to cross-disciplinary efforts...

RC: It is huge. Existing disciplines have certain questions that they develop to address. There are the driving questions, the explanatory scheme, the explanatory posits, the theories the sciences talk about as doing the important explanatory work. So you have a conceptual apparatus and that comes with a set of entities and measures. So if you are asking new

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6 Curren and Metzger, *Living Well Now and in the Future*, x.

questions the way we are now asking questions about sustainability, you need to develop new concepts and new theoretical constructs, and new measures to go with them. And these are not going to be part of any antecedent science. Some of them might be partially based on existing concepts and posits, but in the emerging field of sustainability studies, we have to invent a new system of concepts and posits and measures. So, we are doing that to some extent in the book; we are inventing a new language of sustainability and doing it in a way that is particularly concerned with getting clarity about the ethical matters.

If I can say one other thing, many philosophers doing practical philosophy will realize that facts matter even to the questions they are posing as philosophers, but they will not want to, as philosophers, assert facts. So they will say, “Well, supposing such and such is true about climate, then these philosophical questions are important.” Then they will go on from there. Part of the difference that collaborating with a scientist made for me was that the scientist didn’t have any hesitation to assert the facts on the basis of the sciences. So, this book is written for a very wide audience of people coming from different places, different disciplines, and with different questions in mind, and it is not posing the factual questions hypothetically. Having a scientist involved gave me, as a philosopher, a confidence and some basis for just saying, “Here is the science and we are going to accept it and build on it.”

## The conception of sustainability

OK: This is foremost a book on sustainability, notoriously a contentious concept, subject to numerous definitions. What conception of sustainability do you bring forward here?

RC: You are absolutely right. The language of sustainability is used in many, many ways. Examining it over a period of time, I thought a lot of it was inexact and loose. We were concerned with having a well-defined vocabulary or language of sustainability. A very important factor was the history of negotiations leading up to a kind of global north–south understanding about the importance of both protecting the environment—hence a kind of environmental or ecological sustainability—and the importance of addressing poverty. So the doctrine of sustainability *and* development emerged from a geopolitical process, and this language evolved into talking about sustainable development.

We argue that it is difficult to achieve a morally or ethically optimal understanding of sustainability if you begin from the idea of sustainable development. There is a presumption built into the idea of sustainable development that development is in some ways favorable to sustainability. We agree, but we think that it is also important to be clear about the ways in which development is *not* favorable to ecological sustainability. It is more conducive to conceptual clarity and being able to frame and investigate the key questions, if you begin by defining sustainability as an ecological concept. So that is the primary point of departure of the book.

What is most fundamental is recognizing that we rely on healthy functional ecosystems, and if we overburden those systems in ways that damage their capacity, then that is an extremely serious problem. It is like borrowing against your income to a point where

you are borrowing more against future earnings than you could ever repay. That is a strictly financial analogy. So, sure, we are continuing to spend more of Earth's wealth, but we are running up debt which will have to be repaid, and the way in which it will be repaid is that the ecological systems will collapse. In some regions, they are already beginning to collapse. That's the most fundamental kind of sustainability at stake.

The second most fundamental aspect of sustainability is our reliance on whatever we take from nature to sustain economic activity—what we call throughput, the material throughput of an economy. That is a somewhat distinct problem from the stability of ecosystems. It is usually intimately related to such stability, but to some extent they are separate issues. So, distinguishing ecological sustainability as the most important, environmental or throughput sustainability is the second most important. That is where we begin, but then we recognize, of course, that we should all care about the stability of the built and human systems on which we depend.

OK: This is where you bring in socio-political sustainability?

RC: Yes. If you examine the literature, sometimes there are assumptions made that are a bit too quick, a bit too simple, about the stability of social-political systems depending on the stability of ecosystems and the stability of throughput. These forms of dependency are crucial, but there are further dimensions of socio-political sustainability. Socio-political systems—or socio-political-economic-educational systems, for they are all interrelated systems the way they work now—could have patterns and dynamics that would cause them to fail, irrespective of whether those human systems are taxing ecological systems or throughput streams to where they are going to fail.

### **The ethical heart of sustainability: Preserving opportunities to live well**

OK: It seems that in all that you bring forward there is a focus on preserving opportunities to live well...

RC: Yes, this is an attempt to put a finger on the ethical heart of the idea of sustainability. The idea of sustainability is about how we are living, and whether the way we are living is overburdening the natural world in a way that cannot go on indefinitely. The basic assumption about all these demands on the natural world is that they are a convenient or necessary basis for us to live in a way we desire to live. I think from an ethical standpoint, what we desire in how to live is not as ethically salient or important as what's actually conducive to us living well. Because I think we would all agree that what we want is to live well, even though we disagree about what is involved in living well and necessary to living well.

We are living in the way we do, overburdening nature, thinking that this is all essential to living well. But once you frame things this way, you can ask the hard philosophical and, to some extent, empirical, psychological, and social questions about what actually is inherently involved in living well. What is necessary to living well? How do our institutions shape the decisions we make that drive up consumption with each passing generation? And what is the evidence that driving up consumption is actually enabling us to live better? It turns

out, when you pose these questions, that the evidence is not very good that we are actually living better. We are living in a more consumptive way; many people have a more luxurious lifestyle. But we are not on the whole demonstrably happier. The question then is why are institutions functioning this way? Why do they drive up consumption and overburden the natural world in a way that will diminish opportunities to live well in the future, while also apparently not doing such a good job of enabling us to live well now? If you are concerned about us living well now, and feeling free to focus enough on the future to not destroy future opportunity, then it is very natural to focus on the structures of society. It is simplest to refer to institutional structures, but these include such things as how we design cities, how we design transportation systems, housing, and food systems. All of these institutions and the rules of how they operate shape how much we consume. So, at the heart of the book is an attempt to understand what is inherently involved in living well, and how the ways we are living are diverging from that because of the growth dynamics of our institutions.

### **A eudaimonic conception of equal opportunity**

OK: You state in the book that the defining aspect of sustainability is *diachronic*, emphasizing how the ways we live now have impact through time, i.e. on the opportunities to live well in the future. It is not first of all *synchronic*, focusing on the present situation. On the other hand, when you talk about the institutional dimension as you do now, a synchronic emphasis is also distinct. In the title of the book, you are even combining both perspectives—“living well now and in the future.” Can you flesh out how you conceive the tension that may be perceived here?

RC: I guess something that has to be said, is that the heart of the book is an attempt to figure out a productive way, and an ethically helpful way, to conceptualize what sustainability is and how to pursue it. Offering philosophical and ethical guidance for the pursuit of sustainability requires us to elaborate principles of sustainability ethics and to some extent a way of thinking about justice. So, the book does do those things, though it would have required a much longer book to do them in the detailed way that professional philosophers might want to see. The book was written to be one that many people could read and understand.

John Rawls defends a set of principles of justice<sup>7</sup> and the first is a set of rights and liberties for all the members of society. These should be a reflection of the members of the society sharing the status of free and equal citizens. Then he comes to questions about the other things we need besides those basic rights and liberties—other kinds of so-called primary goods. How do we distribute these primary goods?

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7 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

Among Rawls's distributive principles, the first (and the one that gets priority) is the principle of fair equality of opportunity. So, we try to show that the way Rawls conceptualizes it doesn't work, when trying to conceptualize the preservation of opportunity over time. It depends on there being a common pool of occupations to which people are competing on fair terms, and over time there isn't any such common pool of occupations. So that is a very important philosophical move in the book. I think to understand the preservation of opportunity over time, you have to identify what is inherent to living well. It can't be fair and equal access to whatever opportunities there are. You have to focus on the inherent quality of the opportunities. This is intended to be a very helpful move in the book, because it lets us formulate an objective account of what kinds of opportunities people need and then evaluate the performance of society and institutions in providing what everyone needs. The flip side of this is that the evaluation of institutions would also rely on what we know about the association between materialism and unhappiness. People who are more materialistic tend to be less happy. If you induce unhappiness or anxiety it tends to make people more materialistic, selfish, less charitable, less connected to others. Growing inequality within workplaces and society makes people less happy, less able to focus on the inherent rewards of the work they are doing. It makes them more intensively focused on the material rewards. There are perverse mechanisms in the way our systems are making people more materialistic and less happy.

So, there is a principle of synchronic distributive justice stated at the end of chapter 4 in the book. And it is not Rawls's principle of fair equality of opportunity, which requires that everybody, people from all different social strata, must have essentially equal prospects of getting the best jobs. My own principle is essentially that people will need to have equal opportunities to live well, and to do good work. This is a eudaimonic conception of equal opportunity, and it is also projectable over time, or diachronically. Sustainability requires that future generations have opportunities to live well that are as good collectively as we have now. So, it is not a deeply detailed theory of justice, but it is a theory of justice in equal opportunity, both now and into the future. Sustainability itself concerns the preservation of opportunity over time, but to understand what this means and to achieve it we need a eudaimonic understanding of opportunity that also allows us to pursue synchronic equality of opportunity without stimulating unsustainable consumption.

## Sustainability ethics

OK: I have seen Dale Jamieson and Chris Schlottman stating in *Sustainability Ethics: 5 Questions*,<sup>8</sup> a publication that you also contributed to, that they are pluralists when it comes to sustainability and that it is not clear there is a distinctive subject such as sustainability ethics. Here you definitely take another stand?

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8 Dale Jamieson and Chris Schlottman, "5 Questions," in *Sustainability Ethics: 5 Questions*, eds. Ryne Raffaele, Wade Robison and Evan Selinger, (S.I.: Automatic Press, 2010), 118.

RC: I have been doing practical and professional ethics for a long time. If you go back forty years, it was more common for philosophers who do ethics to think of practical ethics as an exercise in applying moral theories. But already thirty years ago this view was being rethought. If you look at the efforts to conceptualize the field of biomedical ethics, you have a domain of practice consisting of health care and medical research. So the question is, if that's a sphere of human practice, what are the relevant ethical principles? It is very easy to agree that physicians should respect patient autonomy, not keep secrets from them about their health, not violate their privacy, and act so as to benefit them. You don't need a moral theory to decide that those are the right principles.

With regard to sustainability, the first question is what the domain of practice is. My answer is that it is everything we do that may affect future opportunity by influencing the impact of human activities on the natural systems on which we rely. If that is the domain in question when talking about sustainability, then my question is just like the one regarding the domain of biomedical practice. What are the relevant principles? It is surprising to me that this question has not received more attention, but the theories of value that have dominated environmental ethics lead one in other directions. I present the principles of sustainability ethics I have identified as applications of two basic ethical ideas: that we should show each other basic moral respect as equals, and that we should take care to avoid harming each other. This is not an application of Kantian moral theory. It is not an application of any theory. Does it have Kantian elements? Sure, it does. But you could equally say that there are Socratic elements.

### **The status of non-human life**

OK: A distinct demarcation in *Living Well* is that you confine the attention in the book to human well-being. As a consequence, as you just indicated, issues like the value of nature, central to environmental ethics, are mostly left out. You don't dismiss this aspect as irrelevant and you even assess the arguments for the value of non-human life as compelling. Does the choice to stay away from this issue express a priority, nevertheless? What is the rationale behind this choice?

RC: You can call it a strategic decision, in the way we wrote the book, to speak to fellow human beings about why, even if they only care about other human beings, they should regard sustainability as important. The subtitle "why sustainability matters" implies a question, and the answer in the book is roughly that it matters to the quality of a human future. However, there are also the elements of an argument in the book that it is not just the ability of humans to live well that ethically matters—the ability of non-humans to live well also ethically matters. At the point when we were imagining that we would complete a much shorter book in several years less time than this one took, we also thought that the question of how to prioritize or balance opportunities for humans and non-humans was too big to take on. I hope that we will find more to say about this as we consider the issues more deeply. For now, we can offer the limited observation that in order to preserve

opportunities for human beings to live well in the future, humanity must live in ways that have far less environmental impact, and limiting our environmental impact will be conducive to the members of at least some other species having greater opportunity to live well.

There is a political aspect to our approach, as well. In the United States, we used to have cooperation on environmental matters across the political spectrum. And then our politics degenerated into attacks on environmentalism as always favoring government control over free markets and favoring other species over human well-being. We were very sensitive to such attempts to discredit and marginalize environmental protection, and we thought it would be beneficial to focus our book on overcoming the misguided wedge that is so often driven between environmental preservation and human well-being.

### Child-focused education in sustainability

OK: Education has a prominent position in this book. How do you justify this priority?

RC: If we ask, “What are the really important ways in which we need to understand the world we are living in?”, it seems to me that sustainability will have to be pretty high on the list. If you are making decisions oblivious to the sustainability facts of life, the lack of this knowledge and understanding of the world can obviously be extremely consequential.

I want to say that the practical needs of life are a key criterion in determining what forms of knowledge and understanding educational institutions need to develop in students. The question for me is not, “How many children need to learn physics so we will have enough engineers for building aircraft or missiles?” That would be an approach to education that is focused on societal needs, perhaps, or military needs, but it would not be focused on what children need. So, what we propose in the book is a conception of public educational responsibilities that is child-focused. What the institutions owe children is to enable them to develop in ways that are conducive to them living well. Now, the way I understand living well involves living in a way that is both admirable and is personally rewarding or satisfying. In order to live well, people will have to live in ways that are responsible, productive, and admirable within the context of the society. So, any educational theory that is any good will have to reconcile educating the child for themselves with educating the child for the society or for the world. We took seriously the objections to the language of education *for* sustainability, because that seems to treat children’s development as purely instrumental to achieving sustainability. The substance of the education we propose makes it an education *in* sustainability, while its goal—like the goal of all good education, as we conceive it—is to promote forms of development that are conducive to living well in the actual world.

OK: And that is the choice you have made in the book—changing UNESCO’s preposition from “education *for*” to “education *in*”?

RC: Yes, it doesn’t mean it is only for the child, it doesn’t mean it is not for society. We let the word *in* signify the kind of learning we are talking about. The larger background theory of education is child-focused. You are not educating someone unless you are promoting forms of personal development that you have reasons to think are good *for* the learner.

The theory of education I have developed holds that there are three basic forms of human potential, which I refer to as *intellectual*, *social*, and *creative* or *productive*. Fulfilling these forms of potential well requires education that promotes the development of *virtues*, including intellectual and social virtues, *capabilities* to do many different things, and *understanding* of various aspects of the world. So, those are the three general spheres of personal development that education should promote. The psychological research on human motivation and well-being that I rely on shows that there are three basic psychological needs that are associated with fulfilling these forms of potential well, and that the satisfaction of all three of these needs is important to happiness or feeling pleasure and satisfaction in the activities of our lives. This research has important implications for how we understand the work of schools and how schools can enable students to satisfy their needs for competence, self-determination, and positive social connection. This is important to sustaining their learning, their sense of progress in their lives, and their preparation for a bright future, even as they learn things about the state of the world and challenges we face that could be very discouraging.

## Climate change and the current American administration

OK: We are reaching the end now, but I would like to touch upon the political situation in the US at the moment. You are, as a nation, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement?

RC: Trump has announced that he intends to do that, yes.

OK: The current administration is in several ways communicating a fundamental doubt regarding anthropogenic climate change. That is a conspicuous situation when talking about conditions for sustainability ethics and sustainability education. What impact does this situation have on the research field we are talking about here?

RC: It is very difficult. There are many words I could use, like *horrifying*. The Trump administration has moved very aggressively to try to roll back the various steps that the Obama administration took to actually implement the US commitment under the Paris Accord.

Regardless of whether the US officially remains a party to the Paris Agreement, the Trump administration has engaged in a very systematic nullifying of the steps that had been taken to reduce US emissions. That is of utmost concern to many of us. The majority of Americans now accept that climate change is happening, that it is harmful, and that it is mostly caused by us. So Trump is out of step with the majority of Americans, and I think that there will be a political correction at some point. It is just hard to know how long it will take, and how much damage will be done in the meantime.

So, I think of course it is a profoundly misguided, foolish thing that the Trump administration has been doing with regard to climate, energy, and the environment. If it were the only thing, I think we would have seen more focused pushback. But unfortunately, there is a creation of so much noise and chaos within a single week—so many shifts and alarming things—that it is hard to focus on climate and just stay focused on that for very long with

this administration. So I hope that the rest of the world will continue to make progress on climate, and that the US will be back on board before too long. This is not happening because of where the American public is, but because of fossil fuel interests and votes in a few key swing states. The number of jobs that are at stake in the coal industry is miniscule and there are vastly more jobs in renewable energy. Many of the latter are threatened by Trump's policies. So, what we are seeing is a very narrow political targeting of fossil fuels swing states, and disinformation campaigns that are massively funded by elements of the fossil fuel industry. The anti-establishment Tea Party is itself largely funded by the fossil fuel industry. So that is the politics of it. Was there more to your question?

OK: No, thank you very much for this conversation!

RC: Thank you!