

On the Ethical Possibility of Sustainability: A Challenge for Higher Education  
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**Abstract:**

**At the heart of the sustainability movement are two questions central to its viability: Are human beings capable of treating the Earth ethically? Are human beings capable of acting morally responsibly for the benefit of distant future generations? Answers to both questions are unclear. This paper draws upon the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theorists to identify the ethical core of these questions. In the process, the paper will show what would be necessary for us to answer these questions affirmatively. The paper concludes with reflections about how higher education, and interdisciplinary inquiry in particular, can be critical to answering these questions affirmatively. The work of Western Kentucky University's Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility is presented as a positive example of educational leadership in the area of moral or values education—the kind of education necessary for addressing the questions of sustainability.**

At the heart of the sustainability movement are two ethical questions central to its viability: Are human beings capable of treating the Earth with care and responsibility? Are human beings capable of acting morally responsibly for the benefit of distant future generations? Answers to both questions are unclear. In part, the answers are unclear because of a certain historical trajectory in the modern world, a trajectory delineated well by 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theorists, that juxtaposed humanity to nature and that championed instrumental or calculative reason over all other ways of thinking and being. I want to very briefly highlight the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and their powerful critique of Enlightenment thought and its consequences. I then will suggest just a few ways in which higher education could respond to the problems they identify, in particular focusing on recent work on empathy, higher education, sustainability, and interdisciplinarity. In this regard, I will use the work of Western Kentucky University's Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility to illustrate my points.

In recent decades, many people have critiqued religious and cultural worldviews that conceive of the relationship between human beings and the natural world in ways that may be destructive of the natural world. The stereotypical example is the Genesis

account of creation in Judaism and Christianity. In this account, human beings are given dominion over nature and it is clear that nature is to be used for human purposes. Nature becomes simply a means to human ends. While one might expect that reason can liberate human beings from the clouds of religious thought, what if reason and the ways we think about reason are part of the problem rather than part of the solution? It is in regard to this question that Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment is so helpful.

The way we think about reason is very much a product of the Enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the "program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1994: 3). The animistic world enlivened by spirits and special powers was gone. In its place was the scientific world of principle, quantification, and pattern. "From now on," they write, "matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1994: 6).

As a consequence of the Enlightenment, the world lost its specialness. The world or nature became just another object. In this way it was disenchanted. Nature was subjugated and dominated. But it was not simply nature that became an object for domination. In the process, human beings also became objects.

In one sense the Enlightenment led to the emancipation of human beings—emancipation from magical and superstitious thinking; emancipation from blind obedience to authority—whether that be the king or the church. No longer must human beings blindly accept the ends or aims of the authorities. We could think for ourselves and choose our own ends or aims. In the process, however, human beings not only gained greater subjectivity through the development of their analytical powers of reason, but they turned these powers upon themselves. They thus became objects. The benefit of the development and democratization of reason was a renewed subjectivity, but it came at the cost of potential objectification and, consequently, a loss of freedom. "The human being, in the process of his emancipation, shares the fate of the rest of his world," Horkheimer writes. "Domination of nature involves domination of man" (Horkheimer 2004: 64). In such a situation, human beings become simply agents for the subjugation and domination of nature—whether that be the physical world or human beings. Nothing has any intrinsic value. Everything is empty. Horkheimer writes in his essay "The Revolt of Nature":

As the end result of the process, we have on the one hand the self, the abstract ego emptied of all substance except its attempt to transform everything in heaven and on earth into means for its preservation, and on the other hand an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated, without any other purpose than that of this very domination. (Horkheimer 2004: 66-7)

This situation is not conducive to freedom. In such a situation we are robbed of our freedom. In such a situation, instrumental reason—the use of reason to figure out the effective means to achieve predetermined and unquestioned ends—reigns supreme.

The recent decline of the arts (look at the disappearance of school funding for art and music as well as the political attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts) and the increase of rampant consumerism (not unrelated phenomena) are consequences of the processes set in motion by Enlightenment thought. Perhaps nothing reveals the lie of contemporary freedom more than consumerism. While we relish our freedom of choice, we hardly recognize that the instrumental reason of producers and marketers makes that freedom meager at best and delusional at worst. As Adorno affirms, “The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object” (Adorno 1991: 99). It is in this sense that Adorno argues that the culture industry is not a consequence of human desires, it does not conform itself to the ends of the consumer, rather it conforms the consumer to itself. Adorno concludes that “the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims” (Adorno 1991: 185). For his part, Horkheimer writes:

Although the consumer is, so to speak, given his choice, he does not get a penny’s worth too much for his money, whatever the trademark he prefers to possess. The difference in quality between two equally priced popular articles is usually as infinitesimal as the difference in the nicotine content of two brands of cigarettes. Nevertheless, this difference, corroborated by ‘scientific tests,’ is dinned into the consumer’s mind through posters illuminated by a thousand electric bulbs, over the radio, and by use of entire pages of newspapers and magazines, as if it represented a revelation altering the entire course of the world rather than an illusory fraction that makes no real difference, even for a chain smoker. (Horkheimer 2004: 68)

It is clear that reason can just as easily be used to manipulate and rob us of our freedom as it can be used to liberate us from other constraints. So, our problem is not simply what reason—in particular, instrumental reason—has done to nature, but also what it has done to us. Horkheimer concludes:

The story of the boy who looked up at the sky and asked, ‘Daddy, what is the moon supposed to advertise?’ is an allegory of what has happened to the relation between man and nature in the era of formalized [we might read, instrumental] reason. On the one hand, nature has been stripped of all intrinsic value or meaning. On the other, man has been stripped of all aims except self-preservation. He tries to transform everything within reach into a *means to that end*. (Horkheimer 2004: 69; my emphasis)

The key here is that the end (for Horkheimer it is self-preservation, though I would call it consumer pleasure) is no longer of our choosing. We are no better off than our pre-Enlightenment forebearers who blindly accepted the ends or aims of the king or the church. Now we blindly accept the ends or aims of a culture industry that peddles mostly meaningless but nevertheless enticing entertainment. Our instrumental reason, used against us every day by marketers and advertisers, never questions the ends or aims. It simply seeks to figure out how to obtain them.

Though the critique offered by Adorno and Horkheimer could lead to resignation and submission to the dominant social order characterized by instrumental reason, they nevertheless hold out hope for some form of resistance—albeit one that might mean a life of conflict and loneliness in our current cultural context (Horkheimer 2004: 76-7). Adorno compares such resistance to waking up from a nightmare (Adorno 1991: 96). In the end, Horkheimer calls for a new way of thinking about the relationship between nature and reason—one that “unshackles” nature from the tyranny of instrumental reason and that, consequently, will help to liberate human beings (Horkheimer 2004: 85-6).

So how can higher education respond to such a crisis as identified by Adorno and Horkheimer—especially given that most people do not even see the core issues at the heart of the crisis? How can higher education retrieve the liberatory promise of the Enlightenment? How can higher education respond to this crisis, and subsequently start to lay the groundwork for a more sustainable future? I think higher education needs to

move in three interrelated directions: educating for empathy, privileging the role of the arts and humanities, and increasing interdisciplinary work.

A lot of attention has been given recently to the concept of empathy. Primatologist Frans de Waal has gathered an abundance of evidence to show that human beings and their primate cousins are “hardwired” for empathy—see his book *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* as just one excellent example. Psychologist J. D. Trout has published *The Empathy Gap: Building Bridges to the Good Life and the Good Society* and *Why Empathy Matters: The Science and Psychology of Better Judgment*. In *Why Empathy Matters*, Trout reviews a wealth of psychological and sociological research that reveals the central role that context plays in our thoughts, attitudes, decision making and behavior. Contrary to the ideal of reason judiciously guiding our lives, Trout reveals the fundamental deterministic nature of human existence. This does not mean we are not free. It simply means that our freedom is fairly circumscribed, and that the cultivation of environments to help us make good choices is critical to our future. This certainly would pertain to issues of sustainability. We need psychological and social environments that promote empathy (for others with more limited resources, for future generations, etc.) and thus lead to more sustainable choices—choices that involve justifications and attitudes beyond mere instrumental rationality.

The connection between empathy and sustainability is made even clearer in Jeremy Rifkin’s magisterial book *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Rifkin describes a paradoxical situation in which human beings find themselves—the paradox of empathy and entropy. While advances in energy production and use have fueled transportation and communication advances that have led to greater empathy (a prerequisite for a sustainable future), these advances simultaneously have led to a decline in natural resources and the destruction of the planet (represented by the idea of entropy). The question, then, is whether or not our empathic consciousness will develop enough to prevent us from falling into the abyss of planetary destruction. Rifkin writes: “We now face the haunting prospect of approaching global empathy in a highly energy-intensive, interconnected world, riding on the back of an escalating entropy bill that now threatens catastrophic climate change and our very existence. Resolving the empathy/entropy paradox will likely be the critical test of our

species' ability to survive and flourish on Earth in the future" (Rifkin 2009: 2) Or, put another way, "just as we are beginning to glimpse the prospect of global empathic consciousness we find ourselves close to our own extinction" (Rifkin 2009: 25-6).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the "most important question facing humanity" is: "Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the Earth?" (Rifkin 2009: 3).<sup>2</sup>

The steady increase in empathic consciousness is not a given and should not be taken for granted. We may be "by nature an affectionate species that continuously seeks to broaden and deepen our relationships and connections to others," but the social structures we create can foster this natural endowment or hinder it (Rifkin 2009: 39). Structures that encourage class division, first- versus third-world division, and competition for consumer goods become obstacles to developing empathy. Instead, we need institutions that draw people together. What Rifkin identifies as a "quality-of-life society" requires "a collaborative commitment at two levels: civic-minded engagement in the community and a willingness to have one's tax money used to promote public initiatives and services that advance the well-being of everyone in society" (Rifkin 2009: 549). But such a society is counter to what we might see as the "American Dream," which Rifkin contrasts to the "European Dream." "The American dream," he writes, "puts a premium on individual autonomy and opportunity and emphasizes material self-interest as a means to secure both personal freedom and happiness. While the European

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<sup>1</sup> He concludes that the "tragic flaw of history is that our increased empathic concern and sensitivity grows in direct proportion to the wreaking of greater entropic damage to the world we all cohabit and rely on for our existence and perpetuation" (Rifkin 2009: 42).

<sup>2</sup> Rifkin traces the development of empathic consciousness from ancient times to today. Certainly economic development (leading to greater travel, more effective communication, etc.) has contributed greatly. He even notes that some cultures have entered what he calls a "postmaterialist" stage. No longer driven to further economic development simply for the sake of more consumer goods, such cultures are more able to adapt themselves to a more sustainable socio-economic order. But there remains the negative impact of first-world economic development on the rest of the world. While a certain level of economic development has been necessary for the growth of empathic consciousness, the economic development has led to the impoverishment of the rest of the world. "The question," he writes, "is whether the minority of the human race that is undergoing an empathic surge, but at the expense of impoverishing the planet and a large portion of the human race, can translate their post-materialist values into a workable cultural, economic, and political game plan that can steer themselves and their communities to a more sustainable and equitable future in time to avoid the abyss" (Rifkin 2009: 452).

dream doesn't discount personal initiative and economic opportunity, it tends to put equal weight on advancing the quality of life of the entire society" (Rifkin 2009: 547).

The issue is not simply how we practically can create either dream, but how we can change the way we (Americans) think—how we can see the more communal dream as a viable option rather than socialist evil. It is as much a matter of imagination as reasoning—especially instrumental reasoning. Instrumental reasoning does little in helping us to assess our value judgments and decide at what we should aim. It simply tells us how to hit the mark (whatever that mark is). The ends we have been aiming at—freedom of movement fueled by oil, unlimited and cheap consumer goods, homes much larger than needed to accommodate our families, etc.—are a big part of why we are in the predicament that we are in.

I believe the curriculum at WKU's Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility raises critical questions about American values and encourages the cultivation of empathy. Our core course, *Being a Citizen Professional*, requires students to think of their future professional lives as tightly woven into the social fabric. How will they use their education and skills to promote better communities and a more healthy democracy? Other courses investigate critical issues in our society and in the world. For example, my course called *Consuming Democracy* looks at how consumerism and the consumer ethos negatively impact our politics and what we might be able to do about it. All of our courses demand that students think about how key problems not only affect them, but others as well. In other words, it calls students to practice empathy. All of our courses also demand that students think constructively and creatively about how key problems can be addressed and how they might be part of the solution. Such demands require that students question the values or goals that they have inherited.

Unfortunately, much of higher education, from the attitudes of faculty and administrators to the curricula, blindly has accepted the predominant ends or aims of American culture. Whether it is economic growth and development (but for whom and for what purpose?) or personal financial security (i.e., college degree equals high paying job), higher education increasingly defends itself on economic terms. In this sense, higher education has come to be primarily about instrumental reason. Its end or aim is economic success, though it never asks why that is a good worth achieving—or, at least, it never asks why economic success must be the preeminent good. But does it have to be that

way? What can higher education do to promote reflection beyond instrumental rationality—the kind of reflection that might give rise to a more empathic consciousness and a more sustainable future?

I think an important way to move beyond instrumental rationality—my second suggestion for addressing the moral questions of sustainability—is to restore and promote the role of the arts and humanities throughout our educational system. In her new book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum offers a powerful critique of instrumental rationality at all levels of education and champions a different vision for the future. Nussbaum claims we are in the midst of a “silent crisis” in which the arts and humanities slowly are being cut out of our curricula. She writes:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance. (Nussbaum 2009: 2)

Nussbaum argues that the arts and humanities provide abilities that push us beyond mere instrumental rationality. They are “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (Nussbaum 2009: 7). This latter ability returns us to the capacity for empathy—something critical to being a citizen of the world. Without that capacity, our relationships with one another, as Nussbaum points out, will be “mediated by the thin norms of market exchange in which human lives are seen primarily as *instruments* for gain” (Nussbaum 2009: 80; my emphasis). Indeed, perhaps no area of our lives is more driven by instrumental rationality than the market. Being an *effective* citizen of the world, however, requires more than simply being a clever consumer or astute in international business. Being a consumer or a businessperson too often makes the fundamental questions of justice and the human good merely secondary.

For Nussbaum, it is the arts that “cultivate capacities for play and empathy in a general way, and they address particular cultural blind spots” (Nussbaum 2009: 108). The humanities likewise help to cultivate such capacities and address cultural blind spots. An education in instrumental rationality does none of these things. “If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts,” Nussbaum argues, “they will drop away, because they do not make money. They only do what is much more precious than that, make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate” (Nussbaum 2009: 143).

Nussbaum’s concerns about the future of our democracy and education are related to the concerns we have at this conference about sustainability. Indeed, I would argue that they are intricately intertwined. Only a truly functioning democracy and a varied and robust educational system together can provide us the possibility of addressing the kinds of questions that must be answered for a sustainable future to be realized.

In his influential *Earth in Mind*, David W. Orr argues that the problem of education “can be attributed in large part to the fact that all too often schools, colleges, and universities have been uncritically accepting of, and sometimes beholden to, larger economic and political forces” (Orr 2004: xii). Those forces are, overwhelmingly, characterized by instrumental rationality that blindly turns everything and everyone into means to achieve uncritically accepted ends or aims. A sustainable future requires educating students in different ways. “For real hope,” Orr writes, “as distinguished from wishful thinking, we ought not look first to our technological cleverness or abstractions about progress of one kind or another, but rather to the extent and depth of our affections, which set boundaries on what we do and direct our intelligence to better or worse possibilities” (Orr 2004: xiv). Technology (from the Greek root *techne*, which is another form of rationality that is instrumental in character) will not save us—at least not on its own. Technology only can delay the inevitable. We fundamentally need to change the way we think—not just how we think about particular things like nature and society and freedom, but how we think *as such*. Orr cites H.G. Wells, who famously said that humans were in a race between education and catastrophe. Never has this been more true. As Orr

notes, the race “will be decided in the classrooms around the world—and in all of the places that foster intelligence, thought, and good heart” (Orr 2004: xiv).

The kind of education we need is the kind of education that reveals the interconnections and interdependences of humans with one another (including across generations) and humans with the natural world. This is the kind of education needed for a sustainable future. It is education about the “whole.” This emphasis does not preclude instrumental rationality (what Orr describes as “cleverness”), but it subordinates it to a more substantive notion of intelligence. Orr is worth quoting at length:

In thinking about the kinds of knowledge and the kinds of research that we will need to build a sustainable society, a distinction needs to be made between intelligence and cleverness. True intelligence is long range and aims toward wholeness. Cleverness is mostly short range and tends to break reality into bits and pieces. Cleverness is personified by the functionally rational technician armed with know-how and methods but without a clue about the higher ends technique should serve. The goal of education should be to connect intelligence with an emphasis on whole systems and the long range with cleverness, which involves being smart about details. (Orr 2004: 11)

Such an education moves beyond the aims of economic growth and the expansion of consumerism and towards “things that are not easily countable such as well-loved children, good cities, healthy forests, stable climates, healthy rural communities, sustainable family farms, and diversity of all sorts” (Orr 2004: 16). Such an education is inherently interdisciplinary—my third suggestion for addressing the moral questions of sustainability.

Orr is highly critical of the academic silos that continue to dominate the university landscape.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, we “educate lots of in-the-box thinkers who perform within their various specialties rather like a dog kept in the yard by an electronic barrier. And there is a connection between knowledge organized in boxes, minds that stay in those boxes, and degraded ecologies and global imbalances” (Orr 2004: 95). For example, the manager who can raise productivity in the factory fails to recognize the

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<sup>3</sup> Orr notes that “we have organized education like mailbox pigeonholes, by disciplines that are abstractions organized for intellectual convenience” (Orr 2004: 94).

effects of its by-products on a local stream. Or, the city commissioners who approve a new retail development site in order to expand the tax base fail to see its impact on the children in that neighborhood or do not even consider that a playground might have a greater impact on the quality of life of the citizens. The courses offered through the Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility are taught by faculty members from a wide range of disciplines and most, if not all, draw upon multiple disciplines. The courses draw students from across campus, and require them to think beyond the boundaries of their majors or minors. The courses require students to see problems in the context of the “whole”—an expansive and all-consuming context.

Educating for sustainability is not just about providing students with the right content, it is about helping them understand the interconnections of that content. It is educating them not (or not only) in academic disciplines, but helping them become interdisciplinary learners. Orr argues: “Ecological design [for sustainability] requires the ability to comprehend patterns that connect, which means getting beyond the boxes we call disciplines to see things in their ecological context” (Orr 2004: 108). He calls this liberal education, but it cannot be the kind of cafeteria-style liberal arts education where students take isolated courses in sociology or English or history as they “check off” their way to graduation. It must be truly interdisciplinary liberal arts education.

The kind of education Nussbaum, Orr, and others claim is critical at this historical moment is not only classically liberal arts and interdisciplinary, but it is value-laden. The education for democracy that Nussbaum supports and the education for sustainability that Orr promotes very explicitly eschew the dominant values of a culture determined by instrumental rationality, and instead champion the values of interdependence, equality, and justice. These values make democracy and sustainability possible. Orr brings all this together when he writes that “the modern curriculum teaches little about citizenship and responsibilities and a great deal about individualism and rights. The ecological emergency, however, can be resolved only if enough people come to hold a bigger idea of what it means to be a citizen” (Orr 2004: 32).

Educating such citizens must not only be our task, it must be our calling. If we are successful, then I think we will be able to answer affirmatively that human beings *can* treat the Earth with care and responsibility and human beings *can*, as empathetic creatures, act in morally responsible ways for future generations.

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