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Taylor & Francis Group

Ethics, Policy & Environment

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cepe21

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To cite this article: Kathleen Wallace (2021) A Kantian Perspective on Individual Responsibility for Sustainability, Ethics, Policy & Environment, 24:1, 44-59, DOI: 10.1080/21550085.2021.1904531

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2021.1904531

ETHICS, POLICY & ENVIRONMENT
2021, VOL. 24, NO. 1, 44–59
https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2021.1904531

A Kantian Perspective on Individual Responsibility for Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

I suggest that the Kantian categorical imperative can be a basis for an ethical duty to live sustainably. The universalizability formulation of the categorical imperative should be seen as a test of whether the principle underlying a way of life is self-destructive of the system of living and acting which makes the way of life possible. In exploring this interpretation the self should be conceptualized as a socially and system-constituted being, rather than an atomized will. In this sense, a self which lives in a way that is destructive of the system of life, is also in principle willing its own self-destruction.

KEYWORDS

Kant; deontological ethics; sustainability; responsibility; anthropocene; contradiction; moral duty

Introduction

> To be unsustainable is to engage in [business] practices that destroy the very conditions upon which the practices depend. (Anderson, 2009, p. 31)

In this paper I argue that a moral duty to live sustainably is grounded on two Kantian ideas, universalizability and membership in a moral community (or system). Living unsustainably is morally wrong because it is self-defeating (contradictory) and hence, not universalizable. A positive duty to live sustainably may allow for some discretion and differentiation[1] and may involve specific duties defined by an individual's way of life in a system or community.

Kant's ethics has been characterized as anthropocentric and insufficiently sensitive to the full scope of ethical duties in an 'anthropocene' era.[2] I am sympathetic to this perspective, but I think the criticism may underestimate how far Kant's ethics can get us. If human beings have altered conditions for all life, then human moral agents have duties to or with regard for non-human beings, and perhaps even duties with regard to sustaining the ecosystem as such.

One advantage of a Kantian approach, whether or not Kant's ethics is susceptible to an ecological criticism, is that it puts the emphasis squarely on what one is doing now rather than resting a duty to live sustainably on considerations of the future.[3] One of the most well-known definitions of sustainability is the Brundtland definition of sustainable development as development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (United Nations, 1987). This has

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spawned a great deal of interest in *intertemporal ethics*. However, I suggest that resting an argument to live sustainably now on obligations to the future is susceptible (1) to criticisms from (a) empirical ignorance, and (b) futility, and (2) the tendency to discount the future and thus the interests of future persons when weighed against those in the present. The Kantian ethical approach considers what features of the action itself now make it moral or immoral rather than looking to particular consequences in the future.[4]

We might also consider what the charge of anthropocentrism amounts to. O'Neill (1998) argues that all ethics is anthropocentric in so far as ethics concerns the moral agency of human beings. The charge then concerns the scope of moral patients – who or what are due moral consideration by moral agents, or have rights or moral standing that moral agents must respect. Kant clearly places rational agents (human beings as the prime exemplars) above all other moral patients. But, Kantian ethics does not entail that moral agents may treat other beings (most notably animals) cruelly or wantonly. There may be indirect duties to animals, or duties with regard to the environment, that are still duties, even if they would be trumped by duties to other rational beings. Some commentators, such as Korsgaard, argue that a Kantian approach supports even stronger duties to other animals.[5] Still, one might find the general Kantian approach unsatisfactory and lacking the resources to adequately address issues concerning the moral treatment of animals or the environment. However, I want to explore whether Kantian ethics might get us further than one might, on the face of it, suppose.

One might also argue that a Kantian ethic as focused on interpersonal relations and treatment of other individual, human beings (and/or animals), is ill-equipped to address environmental, collective or system level moral issues. One might also argue that sustainability per se is not a moral issue except derivatively. For, doesn't the value of sustainability depend on the independent moral value of the system or practice? Socio-economic systems premised on practices such as slavery or the systematic subordination of women seem morally problematic, yet have persisted for considerable lengths of time. While the plight of the slave or the subordinated woman in such a system was terrible, such systems (e.g., ancient Egypt, the Roman empire) reproduced themselves for centuries and provided many things that have been thought to be humanly valuable: fed their populations, produced great works of art, engineering, knowledge, architecture. In so far as the systems produced good things, one might argue that their sustainability or minimally their persistence was morally valuable.

A utilitarian (consequentialist) analysis could defend the moral value of such a system, on the grounds that it produced net benefits and thereby, net happiness. While utilitarian arguments, such as those of Mill himself, have been advanced to show that there is greater net benefit in systems that do *not* depend on oppression, a utilitarian defense is, in principle, possible for systems that do depend on it. (A utilitarian approach could be anthropocentric, emphasizing *human* benefit, but is usually broader, including *sentient* beings.) In a Kantian or deontological approach the ethical rightness or wrongness of conduct is not dependent on beneficial or harmful results. Net beneficial results can be achieved by terrible conduct (and net harms can result from ethically right conduct). In asking whether a system is ethically formed, the Kantian approach would look to features of the system itself and ask how the system treats one of its components, namely, rational (human) beings. Taking such an approach, sustainability might not be a moral imperative, but would be derivative from the value of the practice or system.

On the other hand, if a practice or system is unsustainable, that is *prima facie* evidence that there is something morally problematic, indeed wrong, about the practice or system, because it means that the practice or system is fundamentally irrational. At least one commentator has argued that Kant's universalizability version of the categorical imperative is itself an imperative of sustainability: act so that your action is reproducible collectively (universally) (Schönfelt, 2010, pp. 7–8). Such an analysis suggests that sustainability does not mean simply the persistence or ability of a particular system to sustain or reproduce itself, but rather that it should be reproducible *by others* and thus have built into it a normative dimension. A social system based on slavery could persist, but such a system is not one that rational agents could universally will or subscribe to, and therefore, it is not reproducible or sustainable *by rational* agents. Such a system would require that other social systems on which it depends *not* reproduce its structure, since that would entail that any such social system could be the target for enslavement and that would undermine the status of any one as an enslaver.

Sustainability & Contradiction

The first version of Kant's categorical imperative is 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law of nature' (Kant, G 4:421[6]). Recast how one proposes to act as a universal principle: could one will a world in which one's maxim were a rule by which *every* rational agent ought to act? With respect to sustainability, the question would be whether a plan to live a way of life could consistently be a plan (a 'rule') for everyone.

Before considering that question, consider how universalizability is supposed to work. Kant's thought is best framed by the negative – if an action is something that you couldn't rationally think everyone ought to be able to do, then it can't be that it is right for you to do it. Consider Kant's example of false promise-making, a promise which, at the time of making it, one has no intention of keeping (G 4:422). The promise maker's proposed way of acting (her 'maxim') if universalized would defeat the very possibility of promise-making because a world governed by a rule that everyone ought to make false promises would be one in which no one would believe promises. Therefore, such a law would render promise-making impossible, and thus contradict itself[7]; it would be self-defeating. One's maxim proposes an action that is possible only in so far as others ought to keep promises and follow a rule to do so. In making a false promise, one is a free-rider, making oneself an exception to what, as a rational being, one recognizes cannot be a rule for everyone. Such willingness signals lack of respect for humanity (other rational beings) who ought to be morally governed according to rational standards, not subjective interests.

Contradiction as a test of moral impermissibility reflects the basic premise of the Kantian moral system – that ethical right and wrong have their foundation in rational norms.[8] The Kantian test of the morality of one's actions also depends on having correct empirical beliefs, about the nature of the action, what its crucial elements are, who are persons, and so on. Thus, in the case of false promise-making one would need to understand that promise-making depends on trust. A rule allowing for false promise-making would erode trust. That is an undesirable consequence, but Kant's point is that trust is

a crucial element in the system of human relations that underpins the very possibility of promise-making. Its erosion would constitute a world in which the very action that one wants to undertake becomes impossible.

The same line of reasoning can be deployed when considering whether one's way of life is morally permissible. If one does not have correct empirical beliefs about the nature and ramifications of one's way of life, one's view about its justifiability could be mistaken. Those who hold and act on unintentionally mistaken beliefs may not have evil will, as the malicious do, but their beliefs and actions based thereon could still represent moral failure. In many cases, persons may have failed in a moral duty to become appropriately informed or to examine their beliefs. Therefore, morality involves not only being consistent (rational in the formal sense), but a commitment to truth, to getting the facts right to the best of one's abilities and available knowledge.

Universalizability is a perspective from which one is considering what the world would be like if it were governed by a rule for everyone (a universal law) that embodies one's plan of action. That sustainability considerations are very much about the kind of world one's actions constitute suggests a point of entry into the Kantian perspective. To see what that involves, consider another of Kant's own examples.

According to Kant, suicide based on self-love would be morally impermissible (G 4:422).[9] Self-love is a life-affirming or life-promoting principle. A law that says that everyone ought to commit suicide out of self-love would be contradictory: it would be a world in which the very principle that affirms life justifies destroying life. As a rational being, I cannot will such a world. From a self-concerned perspective, considering solely my own welfare and relieving myself of depression or world-weariness, I might be indifferent to the underlying rational considerations and will such a thing. But, the Kantian point is that a rational being could not will that everyone, that *nature itself*, be so constituted because of the irrationality (contradictoriness) of a principle that would be both life-affirming and life-destroying (not-life-affirming). Kant's thought is, if it's not a rule by which everyone ought to be governed, then it's not a rule by which I ought to be governed.

This is not a consequentialist point. Kant is not saying that my particular choice or death would make the world such a place. He's saying that the reason given can't morally justify the choice because of the kind of world it would be were such a reason to carry justificatory force. If it carried justificatory force, it would be a good reason for everyone. But, that would be a world in which people could justifiably kill themselves whenever they felt like it on the very same ground (self-love) that would urge affirming life and not killing. Kant's point is that a world so governed would be irrationally constituted and no rational being could affirm a system so constituted.

In considering Kant's suicide example, we see that there is something deeply irrational (contradictory) and therefore immoral with a maxim that would simultaneously justify affirming and destroying life. And that is exactly the crux of sustainability. Ought a way of life perpetuate itself? To evaluate that, one has to ask, what is its basis? What is the rule or maxim on which the way of life is based? Suppose someone affirms the justifiability of their own (or their family's, or their nation's) consumption, use of resources or waste production on the grounds that it supports their way of life. Suppose the basis for this way of life is linear, extractive, and polluting, that is, suppose the underlying rule is 'use and dispose of natural resources without limit or without regard to the impact on the resource or way of life.' The reason for living this particular way of life is that it is life-sustaining. But

when universalized the principle sustaining such a way of life would at the same time destroy the way of life. A rational being could not will that the world be so constituted, that beings live in such a way that they destroy the very basis for living that way of life, and possibly for living at all. A rational being couldn't will this to be a universal law because it would undermine, it would defeat, the very plan that one is undertaking. But, if it cannot be a law that everyone ought to follow, then it can't be a rule by which I ought to be governed.

A Way of Life as the Object of Moral Assessment

One might object that a way of life is too broad as an object of moral assessment. While there may be problems with defining what specific actions one should undertake and refrain from, that doesn't mean that a way of life couldn't be assessed morally. Kant himself considers 'way of life' maxims, for instance, the neglecting of talents maxim (G 4:423). Could one will that everyone indulge in pleasure and justify a way of life based on neglecting and wasting one's abilities and talents? While a system of nature could exist on this basis, a rational being couldn't will this because a rational being wills the development of its abilities and the realization of its nature. The contradiction is located not in the constitution of nature, but of rational nature. Similarly, Kant considers whether one could live a completely selfish way of life, never concerning oneself with the needs or plight of others (G 4:423). The contradiction is located not in whether the world that would result is possible, but in the inconsistency in which a rational will would find itself when it was in need and would have affirmed a rule that no one ought to help another. Thus, Kant thinks that a way of life, and not only discrete actions, is morally evaluable.[10]

Living Unsustainability is Morally Problematic

If one's way of life, when universalized, would destroy the very conditions that make that way of life possible, then as a rational being, one cannot will that everyone ought to live this way. Concretely, that means that one cannot rationally will a world constituted by a principle of heedless resource extraction, consumption, waste production and CO_2 emission. Such a world would defeat one's own, and every rational agent's, way of life. If the principle cannot justify living in such a way for everyone, then it cannot justify my living this way.

From the Kantian perspective living unsustainably is morally wrong because it is contradictory. Is a duty to not live unsustainability a 'perfect' duty like the duty to not make false promises? In Kant's system, perfect duties follow from the demonstration that the maxim is contradictory and are sufficiently action guiding; they are precise, proscribing particular actions and representing those actions as necessary. The injunction is to refrain from performing the morally wrong action (suicide out of self-love, false promise-making); in refraining, one has fulfilled one's moral duty. But, in each of the way of life examples, the imperative to refrain from letting one's talents rust or from living selfishly is what Kant calls an imperfect duty because by itself it does *not* offer complete action guidance. It's not sufficient to simply refrain from neglecting one's talents or selfishness; one has some, albeit unspecified, duty to develop one's talents or to help others. An imperfect duty is not precisely defined. Similarly, a duty to not live unsustainably does not seem, by itself, to show precisely what one ought to do.

The unsustainability maxim seems to be a perfect duty in so far as a rational agent cannot will *a world* constituted in such a way. (The contradiction doesn't seem to be located only in the will, as with the rusting talents and selfishness maxims.) However, like an imperfect duty, the proscription is not precise or represent a specific action as necessary. Do not live unsustainably! But, *what* is one morally required to do? Should one 'opt out' and refrain from participating in the practices that constitute the unsustainable way of life? But, one must live, and how one should live cannot be defined in purely negative terms. Thus, like Kant's imperfect duties ('Realize one's talents,' or 'Pursue self-improvement'), there is a duty – 'Live sustainably!' – for which the categorical imperative alone may not be sufficiently action guiding. The Kantian approach suggests that it is morally wrong to live as most people in economically developed countries live,[11] and that there is a moral duty to live differently, minimally, let's say to reduce one's carbon emissions and pollution, but it doesn't prescribe exactly what one should do.

Previously, I suggested that rationality involves not only non-contradiction, but also a commitment to truth, to getting the facts right so that one can properly formulate one's action. Recall the proscription of false-promise making: one clearly recognizes the contradiction when one understands the essential role of trust in human relations and that a universal rule allowing or prescribing deception undermines trust and thus, the very possibility of the action which one proposes to undertake. In Kant's rusting talents example, to realize a positive duty to develop one's talents, one needs to know what those talents are, which ones one has the resources to develop, and the impact of developing one's talents on other duties that one might have. A duty to develop one's talents could not justify abandoning one's dependent children, but would be constrained by parental duty (and perhaps vice versa, as well). Fulfilling a talent developing duty could take many forms for different individuals depending on their abilities, other duties and life contexts. Similarly, to fill out what a duty to live sustainably involves one would need to know what sustainability is, what one's role and participation is, what one can do to live sustainably and the impact of fulfilling a duty to live sustainably on other duties. I turn now from Kant to a consideration of what sustainability is.

Sustainability

Many formulations of an ethical duty to live sustainably emphasize obligations to future generations, as does the previously mentioned Brundtland definition of sustainable development, which invokes three ideas, economics, equity, and environment: Development is good because it lifts people out of poverty, it must be fair to both present and future people, and must not deplete resources or irreparably corrupt the environment.

The Brundtland definition is a resource sufficiency approach to sustainability,[12] an approach that considers empirical questions about how long, under what conditions, and for whom a particular resource will last: it estimates stock or store of available resources; measures rate of depletion or utilization; predicts how long a practice can be continued, considering sufficiency of resources and for whom; identifies what can and should be conserved. Morally, it considers the issue of fairness in distribution of resources and in the environmental impact of resource use.

Another approach to sustainability that derives from ecological modeling would be a 'functional integrity' approach.[13] Thompson (1997) characterizes this as a systems approach to sustainability that focuses on understanding (a) reproductive mechanisms and how specific practices and system activities place those mechanisms at risk; (b) system endogenous and exogenous threats[14]; (c) capacity of a system to reproduce its essential elements through a series of cycles; (d) parameters or boundaries of the system.

A system may not be purely 'natural.' A human water management system might have functional integrity when its withdrawals do not exceed the system's ability to replenish itself, and be unsustainable when they exceed replenishment. Human practices could be components or features of ecological systems that can drive them into 'states from which reproductive processes cannot recover' (Thompson, 1997). For example, crucial elements (practices) of the fishing industry threatened the system's capacity to reproduce itself over time, leading to the collapse of some of the world's fisheries and endangering many others. The key is not only whether a given practice *would* lead to collapse, but equally important whether and how a practice is systemically reinforced. If some practice or element would lead to collapse, but so few people are likely to engage in the practice, then it may not constitute a threat to the functional integrity of a system (Thompson, 1997), although it might still be wrong for other reasons. On the other hand, if a system *requires* performance of a system-undermining practice, then the system is (endogenously) vulnerable and hence, unsustainable.[15]

The resource sufficiency approach lends itself to thinking of ethical duties in terms of consequences, of net harms and benefits to current and future others. One challenge is how to weigh the needs and interests ('welfare') of present and future persons.[16] In a Kantian ethical perspective, insofar as the universe of rational persons, wherever and whenever they exist, constitutes the moral domain, future persons could be considered morally relevant and due respect. (Their *welfare* could be morally relevant in so far as having it met is instrumental to sustaining a moral self, although by itself welfare is not the foundational ethical consideration for Kant.[17])

While the resources sufficiency approach is helpful and independent moral arguments can be given for why future persons ought to be given moral consideration, in my view the functional integrity model better captures the concept of sustainability. Sustainability does concern the future in the sense of the perpetuation of a system over time, but the core issue is whether the elements of the system are reproducible; an unsustainable system would be one in which the elements are not reproducible and threaten the integrity of the system.

The functional integrity conceptualization locates the issue of resource use in the context of systemic practices. This is helpful because merely as an individual (or as a particular group or organization) one might be inclined to count one's particular resource use as miniscule or negligible, and thus not a significant practical or moral issue for sustainability. With the functional integrity approach, individual practices and activities are seen as components of a system on which individuals are mutually interdependent and where practices can amplify and reinforce one another. While this might foster individuals thinking that they have no responsibility because the issue or the problem is the system, the systems approach could also be seen as shaped by individuals' (participants') choices and activities at the same time as it structures and shapes them. Therefore, an individual could take a perspective on herself as a member, contributor, producer and reproducer of a system.

Living Sustainability in a Moral System

The systems approach has several Kantian dimensions to it. For Kant, being a member of a system is not just a natural phenomenon as if one were just a cog in a mechanical world. This does not necessarily undermine freedom, for even within a system, an individual (usually) has choice, and therefore, some freedom.[18] Rather, the individual is also a member of a system of rational persons making choices in the context of and interdependent on ecological, social, political forces and systems. As such she can examine her own practices as elements of, and the extent to which they are reproducible or threatening to, a system. In a complex socio-economic-ecological system it might be difficult to see one's individual practices as system elements. But, there are powerful ways of doing so. For instance, carbon footprint modeling, in spite of its flaws, vividly represents one's practices as systemically reinforced elements that if universalized, would destroy (contradict) the very system they constitute (represented by the number of earths that would be required to sustain such practices). This is a Kantian moment in recognizing what is wrong about them. If living unsustainably is contradictory, if it is destructive of the system or community of rational persons by being destructive of the socio-economic-ecological system with which it is interwoven and interdependent and which it purports to sustain, then one has a duty to live differently. One can not stop living altogether. But one can start by identifying behaviors that one could change, even if one's own individual changes alone don't alter the system as such. Just as one has a positive duty to develop one's talents or to help others to the extent that one is able, one is morally required to live sustainably to the extent that one is able. As an individual alone one may not change the unsustainable system, just as in Kant's rusting talents example no one individual's commitment to developing her talent can ensure that rational nature everywhere is developed and realized. But, as a rational person, and as one who recognizes herself has a member of a moral system or community, one still has a duty to realize, to aim for, a morally right way of acting. One might also see oneself as having a duty to not contribute to harm, even if one's action by itself does not change the system and even if there is some personal cost (say, inconvenience in foregoing travel or taking a slower mode of transportation). The positive duty that follows from the recognition of unsustainability can take many forms, but one ought to do some specific acts in the present, rather than participating heedlessly in and reenacting the practices of an unsustainable, irrational system.

The individual as a rational, moral being also ought to see herself as a member of a 'community of ends,' as a moral agent and patient. As a member of a system of rational persons choosing and living a way of life, one creates that community, that system. The community of ends is an ideal community that moral commitment creates. Even when one's action by itself does not seem to make a concrete or practical difference, one should still choose to act morally, to act as if one is creating and sustaining the community of ends. This is a Kantian argument against negligibility. One ought not base one's moral commitments on the actual failures of morality around one, but on the ideal of embodying what is moral and thus on recognizing the ideal of the community of ends, that is, the community of rational beings who are autonomous and deserving of respect. That, Kant thought, is an ideal that all rational agents (ought to) implicitly recognize.

The Kantian approach squarely locates a duty to live sustainably in a duty to live as a rational being and to respect other rational beings ('humanity'). This approach would allow that one may have indirect duties to other beings or may have duties *regarding* other beings (even if not *to* them) that would require many, although not all, of the same moral duties as an approach that says, for instance, that it is sentient beings, not only rational beings, that deserve respect.

Objections and Responses

In the Kantian system, by realizing one's talents (or in Kant's other way of life example, by helping others) one fulfills one's duty whether or not others do so. But with sustainability, in the absence of collective or system-wide action, it might be difficult to even classify individual acts in and of themselves as sustainable or reproducible. On the system model, acts and practices are evaluated relative to a system. If the system continues to be unsustainable, in what sense would individual acts and efforts fulfill a duty to 'live sustainably'?

One might object that if sustainability is a collective action problem and I make sacrifices in my way of life while others do not, then I am just a sucker and my actions are futile.[19] An individual alone makes no or a merely negligible difference. If no one individual is responsible for the system being unsustainable, then no individual has a moral responsibility to redress something that is not one's fault.[20]

A Kantian approach would not be sympathetic to this objection. As suggested in the previous section, the Kantian approach does have an answer to the negligibility issue, namely, that the morality, and hence, obligatoriness, of one's actions does not depend on what others do or don't do, nor on the efficacy in bringing about a particular result, but on a commitment to morality and to treating rational beings as deserving of respect in an ideal community of ends.

One might argue that having such way of life duties is too demanding. One's actions and moral responsibilities should be understood more narrowly. They are actions that one has a duty to perform in an interpersonal context (e.g., a parental duty to care for one's children). Moreover, whether an action counts as fulfilling or violating a duty or as innocuous and morally neutral might depend on how the action is described: one is taking one's children to school (fulfilling parental duty) versus one is driving a car that contributes to carbon emissions (violating a sustainability duty); or, similarly, in making a beef stew, one is putting food on the table for one's family versus one is implicitly supporting cruel and inhumane treatment of animals and participating in a food system that produces pollution and carbon emissions.

Parfit (1984) suggested that in smaller communities where individuals were known to one another, and the scope of the effects of actions is limited, this was an adequate moral perspective. But, in the modern context, the effects of actions may be diffuse, and harm produced through collections of acts. Individuals need to understand their actions as contributing to systems of relations and themselves as constituting and constituted by systemic (social, economic, cultural, ecological) relations. Of course, individuals have always been socially constituted, such as by kinship and interpersonal relations. But, in addition to interpersonal identities, one has system identities: one is also citizen, automobile user, consumer, large carbon emitter (to name a few). These are identities of the

self, just as much as being sister, friend, parent, and colleague are, and they carry normative commitments relevant to determining the scope of one's moral agency and responsibility.[21]

We have systemically defined individual duties that follow from social locations or identities. For instance, as an automobile driver, a constituent of an interdependent transportation system, one has a duty to drive responsibly, because a rule which allowed everyone to drive irresponsibly would make driving impossible.[22] The duty is defined by specific (and evolving) rules of the road that give content to 'driving responsibly.' Such rules constitute the driving system that all drivers, as constituting elements of the system, are obligated to follow. If one is going to participate in driving, one has a moral duty to follow the 'rules of the road' even if those rules are conventions or have conventional elements (in the US, drive on the right, in the UK drive on the left).

Unlike with the transportation system where rules have been developed heretofore largely for safety and transport efficiency reasons, we have not yet collectively devised or committed ourselves to specific systemic principles and rules for what living sustainably would mean. However, just as with driving, as a collective system-level practice, there are not only efficiency reasons for developing rules, but, one could argue, there are moral reasons: rules provide conditions for autonomy and embody respect for others as due equal consideration and opportunity to safely participate in the system. Even if some rules may be conventions, as the driving example shows, one can have a moral duty to observe a convention.

General principles (e.g., 'one planet living,' 'zero waste,' 'cyclical production,' 'steady state economy,' Broome's (2008) harm principle, or, with respect to traffic, 'minimize accidents'), even if there were consensus, are not sufficiently action guiding. In a collective coordination context there is a need for systemically defined rules and practices, adapted to particular contexts. This suggests some ways to fulfill a duty to live sustainably. Perhaps one has a duty to support or to oneself participate in collective research to determine effective and consistent systemic rules or guidelines that people would have reason to follow and could assume that others follow, as we do in driving. Perhaps one ought to experiment and make an informed contribution to the trial and error process of figuring out effective rules and practices. Even if one ends up showing what won't work (because of perverse incentives, because it's not scalable, or whatever), that is still a contribution to the process of establishing what will. Perhaps fulfilling one's duty could take the form of engaging in political advocacy. Or, perhaps one ought to 'be the change I want to see in the world,' and through personal change and experimentation advance the cause or serve as an example.[23] Precisely because one is socially networked, one may be a node through which social contagion of a sustainable practice might be initiated or take hold and rules established for collectively realizing a sustainable way of life.

One might object that because sustainability is a broad, system-level issue, then the main actors are policy makers, not the average individual. Gillroy (2000, esp. Ch. 5 and147–199) argues that the moral duties of policy makers whose choices determine the collective character of how people live should be based on Kantian principles that promote the autonomy of rational beings and their harmony with the system of nature. But, in addition, the moral duty of an individual is to cooperate and to harmonize her autonomy with that of others. Gillroy suggests the following 'public choice formula' addition to the moral law

> Each person has a duty, in concern for his or her full and long-term moral agency, as well as for the moral agency of others, to establish or to contribute to a just society through private/collective choice and decision making in order to provide the optimal environment within which maximum equal negative freedom of choice can be assured to all citizens as a base upon which their full capacity and potential as morally independent and autonomous agents may find empowered ability for expression. (Gillroy, 2000, p. 177)

While environmental and sustainability issues cannot practically be solved in the absence of cooperative, collective action, the individual may still have the responsibility to live sustainably. Doing so may include a duty to cooperate in collective action or to redefine the character of a local practice or system, to act where one finds oneself.[24] Suppose I am a logger. Cutting down a tree in and of itself appears to have no moral content. On a contractual or interpersonal ethical view, if I violated a prior agreement to not cut down the tree, then doing so would become an immoral act, although not because of anything done to the tree. But, if there is a moral duty to live sustainably, then I might have a duty to refrain from cutting down trees as part of a practice of sustainable forestry. The latter would be a specification of a duty to live sustainably, in this context to refrain from clear cutting and to practice logging differently. As a logger, I ought to live my logging way of life in a non-contradictory (sustainable) way and work with other loggers to develop a sustainable logging practice. This is where I find myself, and my responsibilities are specified by what I am able to do.[25]

Another approach might be to adopt a set of environmental virtues – character traits or ways of living that embody, for example, respect for nature or for the relationship between human and other features of the natural world. Svoboda (2016) suggests spiritual exercises, such as involvement in manual labor that requires interacting with the natural world, meditating on the vastness of nature, on dietary practices, and writing about one's environmental practices as a way of reinforcing and reminding oneself of respect for nature or of what is at stake in one's practices. The goal of such spiritual exercises would be to help transform the self into someone more aware of and committed to environmental or sustainability values.

Membership or participation in a system need not be self-interestedly rational, intentionally chosen or involve being a part of a plural subject (although it can involve any of these). It can just be where one finds oneself.[26] One is an active, rational element that is capable of choosing how to participate. There may be situations in which one has a duty to change the practices in which one participates. One may have a duty to reduce one's carbon emissions and/or to engage in political action to induce collective, systemic reduction of carbon emissions not only because one is rational, but because one is a carbon emitter; one is one of the agents doing the systemically wrong thing. One behaves in ways that are self-defeating of the very way of life on which one depends and which one's behaviors support. As a constituent of the system, one expresses the values and normative commitments of that system and contributes to the harms it produces, unless and until one wills to act differently.

Returning to the question, does the value of sustainability depend on an independent moral value of the practice or is sustainability itself a moral value?

The functional integrity approach by itself appears to make no overt appeal to moral or social values. It might be argued that it doesn't need to because morally objectionable systems are unsustainable and will necessarily collapse: any system that violated deeply important human values and rights could not long endure.[27] But as noted earlier and as

Thompson (1997) argues, if there have been morally reprehensible but reproducible (sustainable) systems, then a duty to live sustainably seems to require the additional step of considering the moral worth of the system itself.

Multiple permutations are possible. Even if an economic system were sustainable, it could still be morally wrong and one ought not support it, and may even have a duty to oppose and disrupt it through civil disobedience, divestiture or other forms of political action. One might argue that even if it were sustainable our current socio-economic system is immoral because it is structured and systemically driven by ravaging earth and life systems, and in some cases by malicious actors knowingly and deliberately doing so for their own profit. One might argue that ravaging the earth is immoral *qua* ravaging, *in addition* to its being a non-reproducible element in an unsustainable way of life.[28] Or, a system could be unsustainable when the immorality of some practice is part of what makes it unsustainable (for instance, a Ponzi scheme, genocide).

The Kantian based analysis of living unsustainably as contradictory suggests that while there may be other moral considerations, there is something morally problematic about a way of living that undermines its own possibility of continuation. This is a cognitive and a moral failure. It signals lack of respect not only for morality but for humanity (the community of rational beings) who ought to be governed by rational standards, not merely subjective preferences.[29] If there is an underlying imperative to not live unsustainably, that is, to not engage in practices that destroy the very way of life they constitute, the positive challenge is to formulate specific rules for living sustainably.[30] Since living sustainably is collectively and systemically defined, a moral agent must see herself not as an atomistic self-concerned individual, but as a participant in and constituent of a system that her actions express and perpetuate. Her responsibilities, therefore, may include participating in the process of formulating the rules and practices that would make that possible.

> As Antoninus, my city and fatherland is Rome; as a human being it is the universe; so what brings benefits to these is the sole good for me (Aurelius, 2011, p. 6:44).

Notes

1. Like Kant's imperfect duties, discussed subsequently.
2. Not everyone shares the view that Kant's ethics is hopelessly anthropocentric. Gillroy (1998) eschews the anthropocentric reading and explores a Kantian basis for environmental duties. Some argue that *rational* being should not be confined to *human* (e.g., Korsgaard, 1996, 2018; Wood, 1998) Anderson-Gold (2003) and Hayward (1998) distinguish between 'anthropocentricism' and 'speciesism'. Some have argued that Kantianism, or an emendation thereof, supports duties to (or with regard to) animals (Brown, 2010; Kain, 2010; Svoboda, 2014; Timmerman, 2005). The 'equivalence' of different versions of the categorical imperative (Johnson and Cureton 2021) suggests that *Kant* thought of morality in primarily human and personal terms. Even so there are resources in Kant for conceptualizing a duty to not live unsustainably.
3. Although in a Kantian framework future persons could be regarded as members of the moral community, and therefore, as due the same respect as is due any rational person.
4. A climate scientist's comment about parenting captures something of the Kantian perspective: '[when] people ask her [Kate Marvel], as they often do, whether she is filled with

existential dread as a climate scientist and a mother, she tells them emphatically that she is not. Her work has taught her that what matters is what we do *right now*, and the urgency of that edict leaves no room, no time for despondence. "I think, when a lot of people talk about climate change and having kids, they're looking to the future and despairing," she says. "For me, it makes me look at the present and be incredibly resolved."' (Gibson, 2020.)

5. See note 2.
6. All references to Kant use the volume and page numbers of the Akademie edition, the standard reference for Kant's works. 'G' stands for the work translated as *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* in *Practical Philosophy* (Kant, 1966).
7. This is an 'internal impossibility,' the mark of a 'perfect' duty.
8. Kant has been criticized, with some justification, for ignoring the particularity of human beings. I have made it myself (Wallace, 1993). But, it also misses Kant's point. If a particular act is my moral duty *qua* parent, a rational being would recognize it as, if not an absolute duty for any parent, then at least as one that has adequate justificatory reason (since there is latitude in defining imperfect duties consistent with a rational foundation). I'm glossing over many issues that would take us too far afield (e.g., what roles count as morally legitimate – parent presumably does, but being a member of the KKK does not – and how actions ought to be described).
9. Suicide on another basis, such as knowingly choosing one's own death in the course of fulfilling another duty, would constitute a different maxim from one based on self-love. Suppose a secret service agent throws herself into the line of fire in order to protect the president from being shot. In doing one's duty, the unfortunate and foreseen result will be one's death.
10. Each of these defines an imperfect rather than a perfect duty in the Kantian classification; I will return to that distinction.
11. Baatz (2014) argues that individuals, rather than countries or organizations, should be the primary locus of responsibility for sustainability because any individual, regardless of social and economic location, could be an offender. Baatz also argues that it would distort a fair distribution of responsibility if individuals who are *not* primary offenders were swept up in an assignment of responsibility to collectives. There could also be individuals in developing or undeveloped countries who are living unsustainably and who have a duty to live differently. The affluent elite in a developing country who exploit resources and indiscriminately produce waste, pollution and CO_2 emissions in order to support a lavish life-style are no less guilty merely in virtue of geo-economic location.
12. A resource sufficiency approach could also argue *against* economic development, on the grounds that raising the standard of living for the poor would irreparably deplete the world's resources, and *for* reallocating what we have.
13. These classifications, 'resource sufficiency' and 'functional integrity,' come from Thompson (1997, 2010).
14. The threat of the earth being hit by an asteroid would be an 'exogenous' threat. The distinction between endogenous and exogenous elements could depend on human interest and how the boundaries of the system are defined. Upstream allocation of water from the Colorado River to supply communities in the American southwest led to the drying up of the Colorado River in Mexico, and disrupted what to the Mexican fishing communities was an endogenous element of their way of life. From the point of view of the residents and political interests of the American southwest, the impact on the Mexican fishing communities was regarded (fairly or not) as exogenous to their definition of the system of water allocation.
15. If working and doing the tasks of daily living require driving fossil-fuel powered cars, then the very requirements of participating affordably in the system render the system unsustainable. (Affordability, how necessary driving is, availability of alternatives, and so on could be debated, but fossil fuel dependent transportation is undeniably a crucial, required element of the system as it is currently structured.)
16. For one discussion of obligations to future persons see Kavka (1978). For another view of obligations to future and past generations invoking the notion of lifetime-transcending interests see the work of Janna Thompson (2009, 2016).

17. It would be irrational to will that no one should ever help others (that would entail willing that no one should ever help me when I am in need). Even though for Kant it is not need or welfare per se that is morally compelling, the implication of his view is that we have moral duties to meet people's needs.
18. Kant understands freedom as 'noumenal,' not as something that natural beings can be proven to have in a causal, phenomenal world. However, Kant also argues that we can't consider ourselves moral beings without thinking of ourselves as free.
19. Sinnott-Armstrong (2010) argues that I have no moral duty because harm is not my fault; Budolfson (2013) that I can't be morally *required* to do something that is futile.
20. Related to or an aspect of the many hands or tragedy of the commons problem.
21. See Wallace (2019a) and (Wallace, 2019b) for development of a comprehensive relational theory of the self.
22. Driving in an abandoned, uninhabited place with no other vehicles would be a different act. M. Thompson (2011) uses the interstate highway system as a metaphor in a discussion of situational awareness for ecological duties. A Kantian perspective, he suggests, is a corrective to narcissism, a tendency to ignore the rules. I am arguing that just as system wide rules define duties in a system of driving, so, too, could rules and (enforceable) regulatory frameworks define duties of sustainability.
23. Lane (2011, Chapter 3) also suggests some of these possibilities.
24. I see this as expressing the stoic attitude of harmonizing with nature in one's local context. 'For he devotes himself solely to the realization of his own duty, and is always mindful of what is assigned to him from the whole.' (Marcus, 2011, p. 3:4).
25. What one individual is able to do may be more than one might think. while it may also be a function of convergent socio-economic and political factors. The complex story of the 1997 New York Watershed Memorandum of Agreement illustrates the possibilities as well as the practical, on the ground difficulties of acting in collective coordination systemic contexts. See Soll (2013), whose felicitious phrase 'political ecology' captures the systemic context of action.
26. For an individualistic, self-interest based account see Lewis on conventions (Lewis, 1969); on a plural subject see Gilbert (1989, 2008); and for a non-rational, biologically based account see Millikan (2005, 2008).
27. This idea is based on a misconception similar to the one identified by Martin Luther King, who observes that a belief in the inevitability of progress might 'stem[s] from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively.' (King, 1963).
28. For example, Leopold (1949), Naess (1973), and Callicott (1989) among others, who argue for the moral value of the ecosystem itself.
29. As noted earlier Gillroy (2000) makes an even stronger argument, that we have a positive duty to establish sustainable *moral* societies, ones that promote autonomy. Gillroy appeals to a resource sufficiency approach – 'the long-term empowerment of present and future moral agents' (p. 183), *and* to a functional integrity approach, which Gillroy calls an 'Ecosystem Design Approach' based on a 'Resources to Recovery' model (pp. 289–291).
30. See Speth (2012) for some systemic suggestions.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge support for this work by Hofstra University, and by Dartmouth College, where I have been a Visiting Scholar in the Philosophy Department.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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