



# Sustainability for the Next 50 Generations

*Henryk Skolimowski*

*Much has been written about sustainable development and its implications. Here Henryk Skolimowski makes the connection with eco-philosophy as its philosophical underpinning, arguing that we need a consistent post-mechanistic metaphysic.*

## Sustainability Emerging as a New Myth

**I**t is a mistake to think that the scientific culture is free of myths. One of the specific myths of the scientific technological civilisation is the myth of progress, which is to say, of material progress — the belief that through the power and prowess of science and technology combined, Western Civilisation and the whole world will be delivered to a better world, to a happy world, in which everybody would be fulfilled or at least satisfied. The passion with which the Western mind has believed in this myth has been enormous. The idea of progress has become sacrosanct. Whoever has been critical of the myth has been denounced as anti-diluvian or an irrational quack. This was so roughly up to 1970. With the ascent of the Flower Children's Revolution and the hippie revolution the whole attitude toward this myth changed.

In 1974, I submitted to the prestigious quarterly *Social Research* (published in New York), an article entitled 'The Scientific Worldview and the Illusion of Progress.' The article was obviously critical of the whole legacy of progress. The editors at first did not know what to do with it. They gave me some evasive answers asking me whether I really wanted to submit the article to *them*. When I responded in the affirmative, after some fretting and procrastination, they finally published it — as I submitted it, without editorial intervention and changes. I was quite surprised and, of course, pleased. I knew that the power of myth was waning and perhaps broken. In truly searching and aware circles, it became clear that progress was merely a fiction, elevated to the pedestal of a myth. In the establishment circles, however, it was different. Among them, this myth was cherished as evident truth.

Yet the feeling was growing that Western ways, of harnessing nature through science and technology (for the alleged benefit of humanity), were a loaded dice with negative consequences glaringly hitting us. Already at the Environmental Conference in Stockholm in 1970, the alarm bells were ringing that Technology is increasingly destructive to Nature.

The Western paradigm was clearly disintegrating. Something had to be done, some new thinking needed to be introduced. The reckless technology could not go on forever. Yet, the idea of progress could not be seriously questioned.

It was too deeply entrenched in Western consciousness and in Western institutions. The idea of Development, that is to say economic development, could not be seriously questioned either because it was a sacred cow, particularly for developing nations.

It is in this climate that the Brundtland Report was conceived and then published (in 1987). In this report the idea of *Sustainable Development* was proposed. The idea was welcomed but without much enthusiasm. The term was awkward and a bit stiff. It is still awkward, especially in Slavic languages. Also, the idea appeared timid and overly cautious. Yet, it spelled out something important, namely, that *development should not go on at any price*. It must have some boundaries, and it must be mindful of its consequences. Thus, it must not be reckless development — bringing big profits to some (in the short term) yet leaving behind long-term scars and ecological costs. It must be precisely *sustainable development*, which is able to perpetuate itself and also bring about social harmony — and not social disruption.

At first many economists, especially in aggressive industries, questioned the idea of sustainable development and even derided it. Even now for many economists, development means merely growth and profit. However as time went on, the idea of sustainable development has been broadly accepted. It seems that the idea was accepted because it did not ruffle too many feathers. It struck a middle ground. It did not demand too much. And yet clearly it showed the direction.

Now, after having recognised its validity, many people, especially outside economics, started to take a deeper view of the idea. They did not question the validity of the idea of sustainability, but attempted to extend its range. It became clear that sustainability should apply not only to economic development, but also to other spheres of human endeavor.

In short, people started to demand that not only economic development should be sustainable, but also that we should talk about sustainable society and sustainable human life. For what good is there in sustainable development if it does not result in sustainable society and sustainable life? Following this line, some thinkers started to perceive that human ethics should be sustainable and human spirituality as well. For ethics and spirituality are intrinsic parts of human life, which is harmonious and fulfilling.

Moreover, lots of people in different disciplines started to see in sustainability the key to their endeavors. This movement is quite pronounced among architects and city planners — not all of course, but those who can see and think. Some of them seem to suggest that the idea of sustainability has no limits. Therefore, they are beginning to design houses and habitats with ‘zero carbon emission.’ In simple language it means no waste and no pollution of the atmosphere. These are revolutionary ideas in terms of the frugality of living — the living, which does not leave behind so-called carbon footprints.

On quite a different level, learned institutions, like for example the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, have established centers for *sustainable systems*. Now, this is quite a different dimension of thinking. Not only are we allowed to discuss sustainable development. But we are also invited to consider the sustainability of *all systems* of learning and of action! This is a significant broadening of our perspective. Especially, as the term ‘sustainable systems’ suggests and implies (in a subtle way though) that all systems should be sustainable; otherwise non-sustainable systems would upset the whole balance of sustainable ones.

We can see a change in the whole mode of thinking. Sustainability is opening up new avenues and new possibilities. Actually two processes have been happening simultaneously. One is a bandwagon effect. Since sustainability has become a fashionable term, many people are joining in, not to be left out.

The second process is much deeper. Since so many traditional remedies, based on science and rationality, do not seem to work, people are desperately searching for something else — in order to get out of the present cul-de-sac. In sustainability, people are beginning to see a universal remedy for all our ills. We can go a step further and suggest that sustainability has become — or is becoming, a new myth of our times — so universal is its appeal and so vast is its reach.

It is quite clear that the myth of progress is waning and nobody consciously wants to uphold it. Interestingly, the myth of *Gaia* has been waning as well. For quite a while it has been a new dominant myth of the people who have been in the vanguard of new thinking. The myth has been salutary in many ways. It has helped us to develop a new symbiotic relationship with nature and a new holistic perspective on all there is. It has also instilled gentleness and compassion to our perception and thinking. Yet this myth has also implied certain passivity and at times a form of narcissism.

Sustainability, on the other hand, implies a wholesome activism, participation in bringing about harmony and maintaining a dynamic balance for all. Now, I am using the phrase ‘the myth of sustainability’ not to diminish it as a fiction or an illusion, but in order to elevate sustainability as this idea which generates energy and inspiration — and which has become much more than an intellectual idea or a technical strategy. Indeed sustainability has become a common focus, for a different variety of people, who are trying to rethink the future and in a sense to construct a new future. In this sense sustainability has acquired some mythic qualities.

## What Philosophy as the Basis of Sustainability?

Professor Hiromasa Mase is a Japanese philosopher who has taught at the prestigious University of Keio, in Tokyo. In the 80’s, when I came to Tokyo, we became friends. At this time he was mainly interested in process philosophy (as well as process theology), which was inspired by the philosophy of Whitehead. He was kind enough to initiate the translation into Japanese of my book: *Living Philosophy: Eco-Philosophy as a Tree of Life*, and to oversee the veracity of the translation. In 1999, the book was published in a very elegant form. We have kept in touch with each other ever since.

In May 2008 Hiro Mase unexpectedly called me in Warsaw. He just arrived in Warsaw, and I was about to leave Warsaw in one hour. We rapidly exchanged greetings and information about each other. I asked him ‘are you still doing process philosophy as you did before?’ ‘Yes’ he responded and continued ‘but also Eco-philosophy as the basis of sustainability.’ This was exactly the phrase I wanted, and which had been lingering in the recesses of my subconscious mind for quite a while. Of late, I have noticed that Eco-philosophy, to which I have contributed quite a bit, has been becoming more and more relevant. Here was another reason why: Eco-philosophy as the possible basis of sustainability.

When the idea of Sustainable Development arrived, I welcomed it, but without much enthusiasm. It appeared to me a grey concept, of limited range and designed mainly for economists. Economists noticed it — but by and large shrugged their shoulders. They have had a more important agenda: *Growth*. I was afraid that the economists would drag their feet forever and would only pretend that they support the idea. Moreover, I was convinced that sustainable development was not the end of the story. Even if we did achieve sustainable economic development, this would not be the end of the story. I asked myself: what about sustainable environment? What about sustainable life? What about sustainable society? What about sustainable ethics? What about sustainable spirituality? These questions were not asked at first.

What has impressed me in recent unfoldments of sustainability is its growing versatility and its increasing depth. Take for example sustainable systems. It is a great idea, which goes much further and deeper than sustainable development. In April 2008, under the auspices of the Society for Sustainable Systems, at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, was invited to deliver a series of lectures and symposia. A strange choice for a speaker on sustainability — you might think. But apparently not at all. The Dalai Lama admitted at first that he never used the idea of sustainability in his lectures before. But in the middle of his two days of discourses, he became comfortable with it. And finally clinched the matter in his way: ‘*Spirituality and sustainable environment are closely linked.*’ This shows the power of the idea of sustainability and the power of human imagination.



Yet, the agenda of sustainability is not completed. It needs further deepening and it needs philosophical foundations, which can carry its enormous and versatile programs and projects. What I am saying is that sustainability cannot be unmindful about its deeper foundations; and I am saying specifically that sustainability cannot use mechanistic philosophy as its foundations. This is not immediately obvious to many people. Let us therefore clarify the matter.

We usually think of the world as a mechanistic aggregate, which moves according to Newton's mechanistic laws and which can be manipulated to our advantage. We do this, even nowadays, although The New Physics conclusively proved to us that it is not a right view of the universe. Indeed some have argued that in many ways it is a *wrong view* — particularly when we want to understand

the phenomenon of man vis-à-vis the Cosmos. In short, the mechanistic cosmology is one of the sources of our problems, including the problems with sustainability. It is quite extraordinary that we still endorse the mechanistic world-view in spite of its clearly defective nature. Put otherwise, we have constructed a deficient code for reading nature. Hence our deficiency in interacting with nature.

The mechanistic cosmology is not an isolated entity. It has created the entire world in its image. It has created the ethos of determinism and mechanistic homogeneity — accepting only the physical. It has created the ethics of efficiency, which has overridden human ethics. Alongside the idea of progress, it has endorsed the conquest of nature through control and manipulation. It has helped to instill in the human persons the attitude of conquistador, who has

been perceived as the ruler of the world. All these fallouts or consequences of mechanistic cosmology encouraged and prompted the human to dominate nature, to control others, to use the resources carelessly and extravagantly and not carefully and reverentially.

We thus can see that mechanistic cosmology does not inspire people to conservation and sustainability but, on the contrary, to uncontrolled growth, domination and ultimately destruction. For this reason traditional economists have resisted (and still resist) the imperative of sustainability. In their veins, as the guardians of the mechanistic world-view, they feel the pulsating commands: grow, develop and conquer other markets, your only responsibility is to profit.

Clearly, the debate on sustainability is not only about ideas but also about deeper roots that define and control our civilisation. Cosmology is one of these roots and perhaps the most important. Other roots of importance are ethics, the concept of the human, and eschatology. Of the many systems of ethics human kind has developed, the mechanistic society has settled on the clinical efficiency of products and performances. Of the many concepts of the human that has been cherished in the history of humanity, mechanistic (or materialist) philosophy has preferred *homo homini lupus* (man is wolf to a man). As the road to human



salvation (eschatology) the present technological society has chosen salvation through consumption. With this kind of baggage we cannot develop sustainability in the long run!

In short, to pursue sustainability further to some lasting conclusions — which would benefit all humanity — sustainability must create for itself some solid and sane philosophical foundations. Otherwise it will be pulled down by the invisible strings of mechanistic philosophy. And this unthinking materialist philosophy has already done enough damage to humanity.

## Eco-Philosophy

And here I come with good news to you! This sane foundation may not be far off to seek. The answer may be in Ecophilosophy, which has been developing over the last 30 years.

Eco-philosophy starts with a new cosmological metaphor: *the world is a sanctuary* (and not some kind of ghastly deterministic machine).

From this premise, it immediately follows that we live in a sanctuary and each of us is a sanctuary. Therefore, we must treat all others and ourselves with *reverence*. Reverence emerges as a new ethical imperative.

From this, it further follows that the *responsibility* for the sanctuary of the Earth and for the sanctuaries, which human beings are, takes precedence over the responsibility to profit or industrial efficiency.

It further follows that we, each of us, have the responsibility for *our life styles* — to make them congruent with our status as shepherds of being, who live in a reverential Cosmos. Frugality of our life styles, respect for other beings and the pursuit of sustainability become our basic ethical imperatives.

In this context, we can see the truth and wisdom of the Dalai Lama's dictum: 'Spirituality and environmental sustainability are closely linked.' For environmental sustainability as well as environmental integrity are not only physical concepts (which can be accounted for in physical units, which belong to hard sciences) but also must now be seen in a new perspective, which includes wisdom, compassion and reverence.

In this new perspective, spirituality should not be neglected or disregarded. Reverential ethics and reverential ways of treating other human beings presuppose a subtle matrix, which is trans-physical, or to put it more simply, which is spiritual. It further follows that the proposed ethos of 'doing sustainability right' (within the reverential framework) is a spiritual work of some sort. Admittedly, this spirituality differs markedly from religious spiritualities.

In one fell swoop, we have redefined our foundations. We now have a solid reliable and trustworthy basis for the work of sustainability in the long run. The Cosmos has become coherent in a new way: not through the physical homogeneity but through *reverential unity*. This kind of new foundation is necessary to make our quest for sustainability sustainable.

Now, the reader should not think that the program of new foundations is an easy matter — as it may have appeared on the first reading; or that I concocted my program or project of philosophical foundations for sustainability *ad hoc*, as the result of the present popularity of the idea of sustainability.

The truth is that the ideas, which are expressed above, represent the work of the past 30 years. Have I worked on sustainability for the last 30 years? No. I have worked on Eco-philosophy for the last 30 years. My classic book on the subject *Eco-Philosophy Designing New Tactics for Living*, appeared in 1981, thus before the Brundtland Report was published. In my book are contained all the major ideas concerning the deficiencies of the mechanistic world-view, and also a proposal that we need to develop a new sustainable philosophy.

Have I subconsciously or consciously tried to develop the philosophy of sustainability? No. My programme was different. To put it into a nutshell: I have tried to devise a new philosophy for the post-mechanistic world, which would be positive (not negative like post-modernism) and life enhancing. *Life-enhancing philosophy* has been my motto and even my mantra. In the enhancement of life, and in the continuous transcendence to ever new and more meaningful stations, the idea of sustainability is already contained. Indeed, life has to be sustainable in order to become more enhancing and more enhancing.

When the Brundtland Report was published, I was a little disappointed: Why only sustainable development? Why not sustainable life and the tactics for life-enhancing life? But I welcomed the idea of sustainability. And waited and waited until something deeper would become of it. And it did! Now I feel that Eco-philosophy, as it has developed and as it will be developed, can make a significant contribution to the implementation of sustainability in the long run; and can even clarify some of its major goals.

Sustainability in the large sense and in the long run cannot be accomplished on the scaffoldings of mechanistic cosmology — which has begotten unsustainable technology and unsustainable material progress. We just need to sober up to this truth. We must not pretend that we can accomplish true sustainability, while we subscribe consciously or surreptitiously to the tenets and assumptions of philosophical materialism and its ally exploitive capitalism.

My central point is this: we need to create solid and sound foundations for the idea of sustainability and for the whole project of sustainability. The idea and the project cannot crumble because we find in the future that the deeper assumptions of our thinking and action are inadequate. Mechanistic philosophy is simply inadequate to carry on the whole reconstruction, which Sustainability (by the large S) implies. On the other hand, all these basic tenets of Eco-philosophy harmonise admirably with the overall ethos of sustainability, which is conceived as a vision to save the planet and to leave a good legacy for future generations.

Philosophy is not the most important thing in the world! But it is important enough to inform us that without solid foundations, we cannot accomplish lasting deeds.

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