

Randall Curren and Ellen Metzger

*Living Well Now and in the Future: Why Sustainability Matters*

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For most of us living in North America or Europe in 2018, living well now means living a life with easy and secure access to a great diversity of foods, abundant and safe drinking water, homes and workplaces heated or cooled to a comfortable temperature, driving our own cars, and access to more entertainment than we have time to enjoy. But while we live well now, we are aware of future hazards: of climate change, increasing debt loads for higher education, and the risk that social, economic and natural systems may become unstable.

In *Living Well Now and in the Future*, Curren and Metzger argue that sustainability requires more than improvements to car engines or using gas that's 10 per cent ethanol. Sustainability requires more even than revamping our transportation infrastructure or energy systems, and much more than reducing our consumption of luxury goods. They argue that sustainability requires no less than restructuring our social and economic systems. And they give formidable arguments for why the educational system is central to that restructuring. Education is not only a large part of our economy, it is where norms and commitments become established. Our system of higher education is a leading site of inquiry and innovation; it is also a leading driver of debt and of socioeconomic disparities.

On Curren and Metzger's account, living sustainably means, first and foremost, living according to an ethic of intertemporal justice. Theories of distributive justice, such as John Rawls', identify the conditions required to secure just living conditions within a society. This includes, for instance, stable sociopolitical institutions and equal educational opportunities for those who wish to pursue them. Curren and Metzger argue that intertemporal justice requires, in addition, preservation of the ecological basis for opportunities to live well, including the preservation of the natural capital (clean water, fertile soil) required for sustaining human societies. Their analysis uncovers specific and somewhat surprising priorities alongside the expected admonition to reduce consumption.

They argue that a commitment to sustainability requires that we revise our system of patents and do more to direct publicly funded research toward urgent shared public needs; that we make changes to our system of higher education to reduce its cost as well as its gatekeeping function; that we change primary and secondary curricula to focus more on

sustainability and on skills for design, economy and adaptability; and that we reverse the trend toward specialised and stratified occupational roles. The strength and focus of the book is its clear endorsement of educational reforms. The authors argue that when it comes to securing a sustainable future, education is prior even to law because educational reforms ‘would provide a foundation of understanding, competence, and civic virtues helpful to enacting and implementing reforms in all civic spheres’ (p. 182).

The book builds a consistent argument from defining sustainability, through analysing the requirements of intertemporal justice, to examining the negative implications of high social complexity for social stability, and, finally, to calling for specific changes to educational policy, educational institutions and curricula to prioritise sustainability. There is no more thorough source connecting philosophy, sustainability and educational policy. Indeed, the analysis of how Rawls’ theory of justice contributes to – but also falls short of – a theory of sustainability is meticulous to a fault. The fault is that the depth of the engagement with possible objections could lead all but an expert social theorist to lose the chain of the larger argument, and the book’s endorsement for specific educational reforms does not seem to depend on its resolution of these objections.

At the same time, the treatment of relevant debates in environmental ethics is thin. Philosophical examinations of adaptive management and systems engineering are relevant to a theory of sustainability, but they are not examined in any detail. The debate among nonanthropocentrists, weak anthropocentrists and strong anthropocentrists is not mentioned, though the approach of the book seems in line with strong anthropocentrism (Norton 1984). And the authors miss the opportunity to engage with other philosophical treatments of sustainability, which is a shame, since environmental philosophers have been developing related accounts and critiques of sustainability – as well as interacting with practitioners and policymakers – since shortly after the Brundtland Commission articulated sustainability as a goal for just policy (Thompson 1995; Norton 2005).

As academics involved in the university’s teaching and research functions, environmental philosophers will be especially interested to consider Curren and Metzger’s arguments for reversing ‘the growth of educational systems mediated by market credentialism’, which they argue amplify, rather than ameliorate, existing social inequalities (p. 100). *Living Well Now and in the Future* demonstrates that not only can the manufacturing economy or the energy economy be analysed in terms of sustainability, but also the knowledge economy. It demonstrates how epistemic forms of wealth should be

distributed equitably through society and across generations. The authors raise a difficult question that has also begun to be treated by environmental philosophers: shall we impose sustainable limits on epistemic and educational growth? And if we come to view growth in the knowledge industry as fuelling unsustainable practices that increase injustice now and in the future, what are the implications for inquiry in general? Academics and educators are liable to see knowledge and learning as an unadulterated good. We philosophers – lovers of wisdom – tend to equate knowledge and wisdom. But Curren and Metzger, similarly to Robert Frodeman in *Sustainable Knowledge* (2014), invite us to consider whether our work as researchers and educators always serves the ultimate goals of justice and living well, or if, instead, our labour has been harnessed by complex systems and corporations to concentrate wealth and deplete natural capital.

The most unique contribution of this book is its application of a theory of sustainability to critique our system of higher education and its function in contemporary society. On the subject of educational reform, it maps a path from philosophical theory to institutional critique to concrete recommendations for changed practice. It uses an analytical and evaluative approach to integrate knowledge from ethics, psychology, sociology and education for the sake of motivating change. As a result, while it would have benefited from a deeper engagement with ongoing debates in environmental philosophy, this book demonstrates how philosophy at its best is essentially interdisciplinary and pragmatic.

### *References*

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