Chapter 15
Sustainability Ethics

Nils Ole Oermann and Annika Weinert

Abstract The article examines the relationship between ethics and the concept of sustainability. Exemplified by case studies, different sustainability concepts will be applied to various philosophical as well as political discourses related to fundamental and applied ethics. In particular the question will be discussed if there are ethical duties towards future generations. Ecological issues as well as demographics will be ethically examined and related to the discourse of sustainability.

Keywords Ethics of sustainability • Ethical duties towards future generations • Applied ethics • Rawls • Kant

1 Introduction

In recent years *sustainability* has become a key term in discussions[1] about the relationship of human beings with each other and with their environment. Efforts to promote sustainable development, such as government policies or self-imposed *corporate social responsibility* programmes, often have – implicitly or explicitly – an ethical foundation. Since the idea of sustainability is at its core that of a protective relationship towards nature and humankind extending beyond the present to future generations, sustainability always implies ethical standards. If sustainability is understood as a "collective goal modern societies have committed themselves to" (Christen 2011, p. 34), then these societies can be seen to have a duty to act

[1] The perspective on sustainability ethics taken in this chapter is clearly positioned in discussion found in the German-language literature. It was felt that such an approach would complement the better known discussions taking place in what might be called a more Anglo-Saxon tradition. To this extent I am presupposing familiarity with such works as, to mention a few of those that are perhaps more notable: Lisa Newton's *Ethics and Sustainability: Sustainable Development and the Moral Life* (2003), Bryan Norton's *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management* (2005), Christian Becker's *Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research* (2011), and Jenneth Parker's *Critiquing Sustainability, Changing Philosophy* (2014).

N.O. Oermann, D.Phil. (Oxon) (✉) • A. Weinert, B.A.
Faculty of Sustainability, Leuphana University Lüneburg, Lüneburg, Germany
e-mail: Oermann@leuphana.de

H. Heinrichs et al. (eds.), *Sustainability Science*, DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-7242-6_15

sustainably. This question of human duties ultimately leads to Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) second central question of philosophy "What ought I to do?" In such a duty-based ethics, the principle of sustainability seems to be an ethical principle that focuses on responsibility for and justice towards succeeding generations.

An essential contribution that philosophy can make to the sustainability debate consists of structuring the terminological difficulties of this concept. What makes the term "sustainability" problematic – not in spite of but because of its widespread use – is that it leads a "double life" (Grober 2010, p. 17). In everyday use it means something is "lasting", while in academia or politics it is a technical term. All too often and in a variety of contexts, there are references to the societal or economic relevance of sustainability, but what is often missing is a sufficiently clear or consistent understanding of what "sustainable" means. The goal from a philosophical perspective should be to structure these fundamental ambiguities.

After this brief look at the classification of sustainability terminology in practice, we can see how ethics comes into play, since ethics is normally understood as a discipline of practical philosophy that provides evaluation criteria, methodological procedures or principles for the "grounding and critique of action rules or normative statements about how one should act" (Fenner 2008, p. 35). This is where ethics in particular can show "that the idea of sustainability is not only understandable by means of natural science terminology and methodologies but is an action guideline based on a genuinely normative foundation" (Christen 2011, p. 35). Sustainability is not a purely descriptive concept but instead aims at "regulating the relationship between society and its natural surroundings" (Christen 2011, p. 35), that is, not only at describing how contemporary societies actually develop but also at formulating how societies ought to develop and can develop. "The natural limits to human action are not values that can be discovered. There 'are' no limits in a strict sense of the word and they cannot be identified as a separate entity. On the contrary, they are normative guidelines that are agreed upon for the sake of a good life for future generations" (Christen 2011, p. 35).

In addition to furthering theoretical and conceptual clarification, ethics has a practical integration and orientation function. It can contribute to "rationalising practical statements" (Nida-Rümelin 2005, p. 8) by introducing well-grounded actions and claims in decision-making situations and placing statements of opinion on a meaningful justificatory foundation. Such complex decisions are mostly found in so-called dilemma situations. A "dilemma" differs semantically from a "problem" in that a dilemma does not involve a decision between two or more alternatives that might be able to completely solve what was initially a complex problem. It involves the weighing of more or less desirable options. A problem, on the other hand, might have an optimal solution. Ethics is often about dilemma situations in which individuals, groups or whole societies are in need of orientation and a structured decision-making process when weighing alternatives or options in order to identify a feasible course of action. The main task of ethics is then not the solving of monocausal problems but the structuring and classifying of complex dilemmata.

2 What Is Ethics? From Principle to Application

The task of ethics is the systematic and structured development of criteria for evaluating moral action. Aristotle treated ethics as a separate philosophical discipline when he categorised the disciplines of practical philosophy – economics, politics and ethics – from those of theoretical philosophy, namely, logic, mathematics, physics and metaphysics (Pieper 2007, p. 24).

Ethos, Ethics; Morality, Mos
The term "ethics" is derived from the Greek *ethos*, which appears in two variations. A person acts ethically in the broader sense of θος (habits, customs or practices) if they "as a result of their upbringing are used to orientating their actions to moral customs" (Pieper 2007, p. 25f.). In a narrower sense of the word, ethical action is when "out of insight and reflection to do what is good in a given situation" (Pieper 2007, p. 25f) habit becomes θος (character) (Pieper 2007, p. 25f.; Fenner 2008). The word "morality" comes from the Latin "mos" (habits, customs or practices), which encompasses both semantic dimensions of the term *ethos* in the sense of practised behaviours that are then reflected on from an ethical perspective (Fig. 15.1).

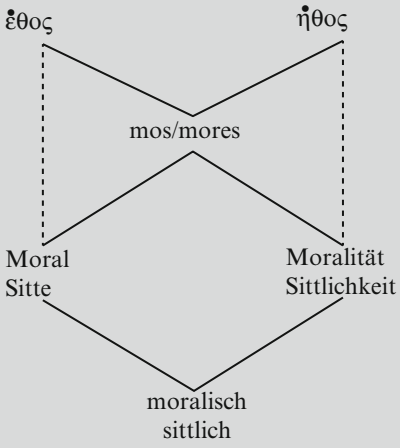

Fig. 15.1 The terminological roots of ethics and morality (Pieper 2007, p. 27)

While the term "morality" is commonly understood as "the *essence* of moral norms, value judgments, institutions", "ethics" describes the "*philosophical investigation* of the area of morality" (Patzig 1971, p. 3, emphasis in the original). In contrast to morality, ethics does not have to do with action itself, but instead it critically reflects on actions and behaviour. An ethics thus understood as critically reflecting on

morality can be subdivided into general and applied ethics. The main focus of *general ethics* is "the provision of a set of terminological and methodological instruments with the help of which fundamental problems of morality can be investigated in depth" (Pieper and Thurnherr 1998, p. 10). It can be further divided into three subdisciplines: normative ethics, descriptive ethics and metaethics.

Normative ethics formulates justifiable normative judgements. When, for example, Aristotle asks what makes a life a good life, then there will be a variety of answers depending on one's perspective. That is why normative ethics is in turn subdivided into teleological and deontological approaches. Teleological conceptions of ethics (from the Greek *telos* meaning completion, end or goal) evaluate actions by focusing on ends or goals that are, in a broad sense of the term, "good" (Hübenthal 2006, p. 61). They make a division between moral rightness and nonmoral goodness and determine what is morally right by whether it promotes the best possible nonmoral good (ibid.). The moral judgement of an action is performed then by evaluating its consequences. A prominent example is found in classic utilitarianism, which has its roots in the eighteenth century in England. It is one of the so-called teleological-consequentialist approaches, that is, moral judgement of human action takes as its starting point an evaluation of the consequences of an action. Utilitarianism takes its name from its core value of utility, which is understood as "the extent of happiness, well-being or satisfaction of desires (preferences) effected by an action" (Birnbacher 2006, p. 96). One of the first systematic treatments of utilitarianism is Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1780). Bentham evaluates an action's consequences by means of its so-called gratification value, which is determined by calculating the degree of pain and pleasure of an action for each person affected by its consequences and then adding these individual values to a total collective gratification value, which is the total utility of an action (Höffe 2008). Other major proponents of utilitarianism are John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) and Richard M. Hare (1919–2002).

Deontological approaches (from the Greek *deon* meaning duty) deny that the right and the morally good are directly or indirectly dependent on an abstract good. In contrast to teleological approaches to ethics, an action is judged not on the basis of its consequences but instead on its characteristics, typically moral duties. An example is Kant's imperative-based ethics, in which duty is seen as an action required by reason. Descriptive ethics, the second subcategory of general ethics, provides an empirical description of norm and value systems without itself making moral judgements. This is its similarity to metaethics, the third

subdiscipline, which in contrast to descriptive ethics does not describe which specific moral judgements are made but instead focuses on a meta-level of ethical reflection structuring dilemmata.

Applied ethics forms the second large category of approaches to ethics. It provides a "systematic application of normative-ethical principles to fields of human action, occupational fields and specific subject areas" (Thurnherr 2000, p. 13). It makes use of "justified universal statements about the good life of the individual or about just coexistence in a community" as formulated in normative ethics and then applies them to specific social areas (Fenner 2010, p. 11). Due to the variety of different problems and fields of action in its corollary disciplines, applied ethics has developed several specific types of ethics, such as medical, science, technology, legal and media ethics. Whether it is constructed on the basis of Kant's imperative-based ethics, on a utilitarian ethics or on a different normative approach, applied ethics needs a corollary discipline that provides it with a foundation of empirical knowledge of its respective field.

Sustainability ethics can be understood as an area of applied ethics that as part of a larger discourse about sustainability examines ethical problems and attempts to structure them with the goal of offering guidelines in specific situations. However, in contrast to, for example, business, technology or medical ethics, it is not a "hybrid ethics", since such approaches to ethics have recourse to their corollary disciplines, while sustainability ethics is based on a principle, with "principle" meaning "insights, norms and goals that are methodologically the starting point of a theoretical structure or a system of action guidelines" (Kambartel 1995, p. 341).

In this sense ethics is looking for "an overriding principle of morality as a final unifying principle …, from which one can derive all specific norms or be able to criticise them with this standard" (Fenner 2010, p. 171). Examples of this overriding principle include Kant's categorical imperative or the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. While these examples are all ethical imperatives, ethical dilemmata can be structured by means of substantive principles such as freedom, justice or, following Hans Jonas, responsibility. Sustainability can be made a guiding ethical principle in the second sense and systematically anchored in a similar fashion as the ethics of conviction and responsibility is in Weber's concept (see box below). The latter as a higher principle also do not ground a hybrid ethics but, similar to sustainability, are themselves principles that structure ethics.

Weber's Ethic of Responsibility and Conviction

A sociologist, political economist and legal scholar, Max Weber (1864–1920) drew a distinction in his 1919 lecture *Politics as a Vocation* between an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of conviction. "We must be clear about the fact that all ethically oriented conduct may be guided by one of two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims: conduct can be oriented to an 'ethic of ultimate ends' or to an 'ethic of responsibility'" (Weber 1992, p. 120). The central difference between the two is found in the principles used to evaluate action. A proponent of the ethic of conviction, for Weber, determines the moral value of an action by the conviction, that is, by the good intentions of the agent, while ignoring the foreseeable or specific consequences of the action. If an action undertaken out of conviction has negative consequences, then they are not attributed to the agent but to "the world" or "God's will" (Weber 1992, p. 120). By contrast the advocate of an ethic of responsibility takes the position that a person is liable for the consequences of his actions and so he attributes them to the agent (Weber 1992). The Weberian comparison was taken up again by, among others, Hans Jonas (1903–1993), who reformulated the ethic of responsibility as an "ethics of the future" under the "principle of responsibility" (Fig. 15.2).

Fig. 15.2 Max Weber

Just as Weber subordinates "all ethically oriented action" (Weber 1992, p. 120) to either the principle of conviction or of responsibility, sustainability ethics can be subordinated to the "principle of sustainability". Sustainability ethics understood as an area of ethics under the principle of sustainability comprises then not only abstract normative principles but can also become a guiding principle through the application of ethical principles to the lives of human beings. Sustainability ethics understood in this way will not remain abstract but will always refer to concrete, practical dilemmata. The task of such an ethics in general and of sustainability ethics in particular cannot be to solve ethical dilemmata much less to give paternalistic answers about the "good" life or "right" action. It can, however, structure the search

for such answers by "emphasising its specific philosophical competence in the public process of searching for a solution to a problem" (Bayertz 1994, p. 26). Its contribution is thus primarily a hermeneutic (from the Greek *hermeneus* meaning the interpreter) one, an act of translation between principle and practice, found in the precise definition of terminology and in structuring ethical dilemmata in order to identify real options to take action. The next section will show how this structuring and guiding act of translation can contribute to dealing with dilemma situations.

Question: What perspectives can be used to define the term "ethics"?
Task: Discuss the relationship between ethics and the concept of sustainability. Exchange your views with other students.

3 Sustainability Ethics: Justice and Responsibility Through Time

Sustainability ethics, some believe, can be defined as ethical reflection from the perspective of a clearly defined and practical inter- and intragenerational principle of justice (Rogall 2008). Although this definition seems to delimit the scope and applications of sustainability ethics, it is a relatively recent area of ethics and its contours in sustainability discourse are still largely blurred. There is little consensus about sustainability ethics, but in the relatively small number of publications dealing explicitly with this topic, there is agreement about which sources and values should be at its core. While sustainability in the widely cited definition of the Brundtland Report is anthropological in the sense that it places the needs and rights of future generations in the foreground (Unnerstall 1999), there are proponents of a pathocentric standpoint that advance the thesis that human beings have an obligation to protect other creatures, as they are also bearers of rights. There are also some who take a biocentric position and extend the concept of moral rights even to plants and other natural objects that are incapable of suffering (Schüßler 2008).

From the question what should be at the core of an ethics – only human beings or also other creatures and their natural environment – we can derive the main difference between sustainability ethics in the sense outlined here and the varied approaches of environmental ethics, with which sustainability ethics is too often mistakenly confused. The philosopher Konrad Ott defines environmental ethics in the following way. "Environmental ethics (synonymous with ethics of nature) enquires on one hand into the reasons and the standards (values and norms) that are derived from them that should determine our individual and collective behaviour towards the non-human natural world. On the other it asks how these standards can be implemented" (Ott 2010, p. 8). Its subject is, as Ott writes in another passage, "the relationship of human to non-human" (Ott 1997, p. 58). It thus relativizes the anthropocentric perspective, as found in most classic approaches to ethics, and contrasts it with an eco- or biocentric orientation" (Ott 1997, p. 59–63). This distinction forms a defining characteristic between environmental and sustainability ethics, since the latter applies an anthropocentric perspective to the ethical dilemmata it examines.

A further defining characteristic can be found in how such an ethics is justified. Ott classifies environmental ethics as part of applied ethics and places it in proximity to business ethics and an ethics of technology (Ott 1997), that is, with the classic hybrid ethics that rely on a corollary science. By contrast, sustainability ethics, as already mentioned, is a principle-based ethics. Even though at first glance the topics seem similar, their different perspectives – anthropocentric versus biocentric – as well as their justifications, principle versus corollary science, form the basis for the difference between the two disciplines. In spite of the lack of consensus in sustainability discourse about possible forms of sustainability ethics, there is, however, agreement that such fundamental principles as responsibility and justice are essential components of it. The definition of the Brundtland Report shows, for example, that the principle of sustainability has at its core the struggle for intra- and intergenerational responsibility and justice. Such approaches that deal with the ethical claims of sustainability are framed by the anthropocentric and Aristotelian question, "How should people live and what is today and tomorrow a 'good' life" (Renn 2007, p. 64–99).

The question about what makes a life a good life is of course by no means a new question that solely belongs to sustainability discourse. On the contrary this question revisits the more than 2000-year-old core question of ethics, which was already asked by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in his Nicomachean Ethics. The core of Aristotelian ethics is formed by the terms *eudaimonia* (happiness) and *arete* (virtue). Aristotle raises happiness to an ultimate end that all human beings should aspire to and makes it the principle of his ethics, while putting virtue at its side to provide orientation in specific situations calling for a decision (Rapp 2006). From an Aristotelian perspective, the good life consists of the activity of the soul in accordance with *ergon*, which is the function, task or work particular to human beings and represents the best possible state of the soul (Rapp 2006). The excellence or virtuousness (*arete*) of a person is the result of the exercise of their *ergon*. "Human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete." (Aristotle, EN 1098a 16–20). Aristotle locates this activity in the contemplative life, at the centre of which is found the cultivation of what he calls the theoretical disciplines of, alongside philosophy and theology, for example, astronomy or mathematics (Rapp 2006, p. 73).

In sustainability discourse, this age-old question of what makes the "good life" is given an intertemporal extension beyond the ancient study of virtue in the present day into the future. Even if there are many contemporary answers to the question, it is clear that, as can be seen in Aristotle, the traditional questions and answers of ethics can make an important contribution to a future-oriented discussion of sustainability. By means of exemplary dilemmata from the sustainability debate, namely, the discussion about pension policy in light of demographic change and the question of a just and sustainable distribution of resources, the next section will show exactly what kind of contribution the classic approaches to ethics discussed above will be able to make sustainability discourse.

Question: What are the differences between the environmental and sustainability approaches to ethics?

4 Exemplary Approaches to Dealing with Dilemmata in Sustainability Ethics

4.1 Dilemma 1: Generational Contracts in the Light of Demographic Change

Demographic changes impact social security systems, and the ageing of society exacerbates the question of the duties of the present generation towards future generations. In November 2009 the 12th coordinated population projection of the German Federal Office of Statistics came to the following findings for the time period 2008–2060: "Germany's population is decreasing, its people are getting older and there will be – even if birth rates rise slightly – fewer children born than there are today" (Egeler 2009, p. 8). A consequence of this demographic trend is that the "numerical ratio of potential recipients of benefits of pension insurance schemes compared to the potential contributors to these systems [will] worsen" (Egeler 2009, p. 12). A dwindling number of the working-age population must then in future provide for a growing number of people of pension age. Extensive obligations are being imposed on future generations in comparison to those prior to them (Fig. 15.3).

From a philosophical perspective this situation raises a central question for sustainability ethics, namely, whether it is even possible to impose obligations on future unborn generations, and if so what exactly these might be. This question belongs to a duty and imperative-based ethics and is a core question of sustainability discourse, and it is also not a new one. Above all in the Kantian ethics of duty, it is a central topic, so that Kant can serve as a key reference in structuring the dilemma. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781, he formulated the three key questions of his philosophy (Kant 1973, p. 522f.): "The whole interest of reason, speculative as well as practical, is centred in the three following questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope?"

The first question, which metaphysics is to provide the answer for, is directed at determining "the origin, as well as of the extent and limits of our speculative reason"; the second, the province of ethics, builds on the answer to the first and focuses on "transcendental and practical human freedom, that is, a person's capability to freely be causally effective in the world" (Klemme 2009, p. 13); and the third question, to be answered by religion and metaphysics, enquires into the "highest goal we can hope to achieve by means of our pure practical reason" (Klemme 2009, p. 13). In 1793 Kant added a fourth question, one that he thought encompassed all three prior questions: "What is a human being?" (Kant 1969, p. 429).

In sustainability discourse, it is the second question that is at first particularly interesting. However, Kant's imperative-based ethics, at the centre of which is the question of ought and of human duty, is an ethics oriented to the present. Duty is for Kant "an action that is absolutely necessary, that is, it is made absolutely necessary

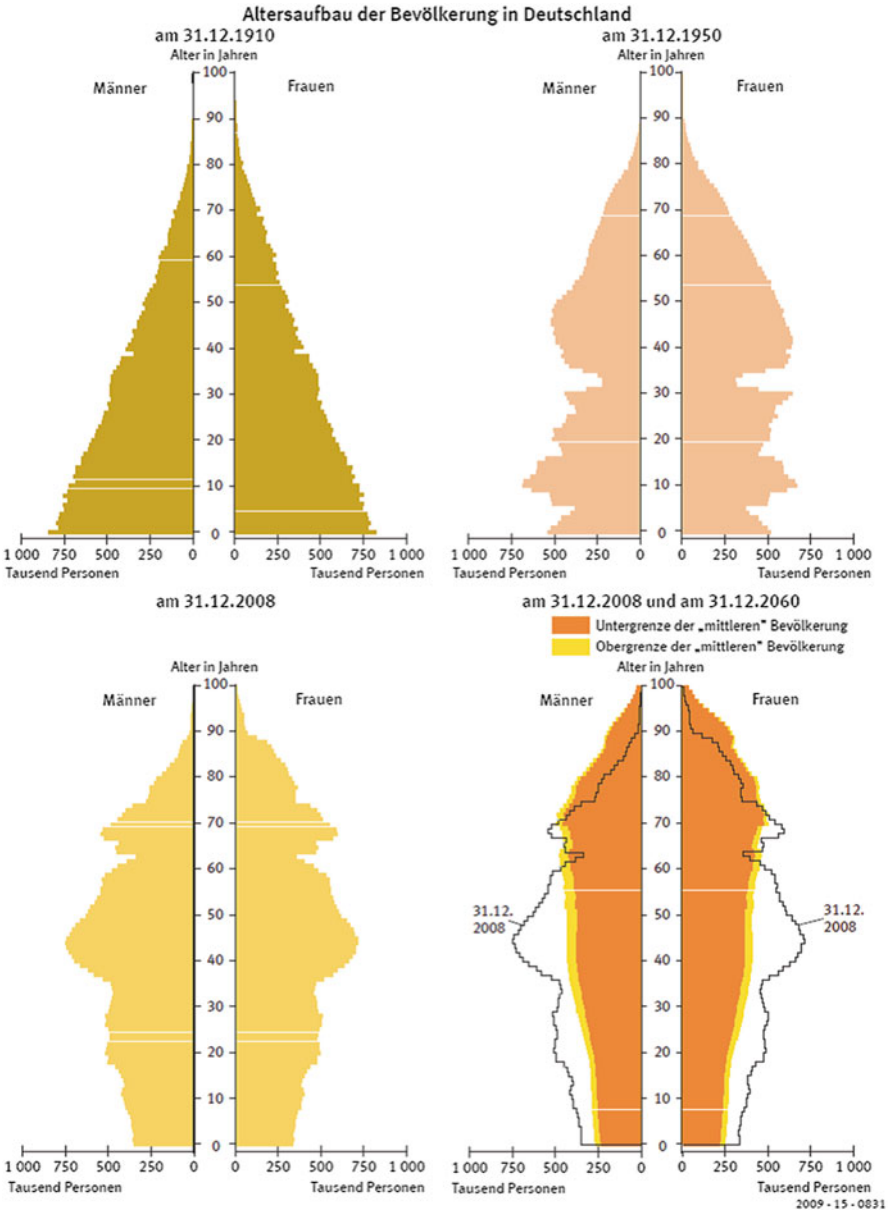

Fig. 15.3 Age structure of the population in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2009)

by reason", and in such a way "'as if' there were a supernatural law" (Eisler 2002, p. 417). The moral necessity behind duty is derived from the freedom of the individual as a rational being and the autonomy of their reason.

The core ethical problem of the principle of sustainability can now be located in the question whether there can be such ethical obligations towards future genera-

tions, since future generations at least today from a legal point of view are not yet able to be a claimant because they do not have the legal characteristics of a natural person *ad personam*. In the case of the pension system, the question is thus whether in view of projected demographic trends present generations can already be said to have an ethical duty to act, due to political or individual decisions, towards those generations that in the future – if the present old-age social security system remains unchanged – will have to pay for their own pensions. There is little agreement as to who these Kantian "rational beings" will be in future generations, whose future needs can be so little estimated as the resources that will be available in the future.

From a theological point of view, this dilemma can be ultimately reduced to the New Testament question: "Who is my neighbour?" The answer cannot only include the number of people that an individual actually knows at a given time, such as members of the family, friends or neighbours. Ott argues that ethical judgements can be formulated in the present that involve rights and interests in the future so that an action "can already be impermissible or a norm can already be invalid, even though its consequences and side-effects might first affect persons in the future" (Ott 1996, p. 141). He assumes then that future generations will be similar in relevant characteristics to present ones; would have similar basic needs, interests and preferences to those living today; and would not be willing to accept harms, disadvantages or deficiencies in favour of present generations.

This broad understanding of the concept of duty and moral capability shows again the distance of a purely environmental ethics approach to an exclusively anthropocentric ethics. In order to justify a universalistic position that considers it necessary in principle to morally account for all future persons in actions undertaken in the present, Ott develops six universalistic principles drawn from Kambartel, Habermas, Birnbacher, Singer, Jonas and Apel. In combination these yield the following test questions for the morality of present actions for future generations. "Does this behaviour show consideration for future persons, is it universally generalizable, will all future generations potentially be able to agree with it, does it produce a maximum amount of human happiness over an extended period of time, is it, in the sense of Hans Jonas, compatible, does it contribute to an ideal communication community in the sense of Karl-Otto Apel" (Ott 1996, p. 148). If these questions can be answered positively, then our duties towards future generations will have been adequately accounted for.

Conflicts of ethical duties regarding future generations can thus be structured if, following Kant, sustainability is viewed as a problem of reason on a virtual timeline. Since if we assume that future generations are not dissimilar to present generations in their needs to create a good life, then those who would in the present make it difficult or impossible to meet those needs would be called on not only for reasons of sustainability but would be obligated in a Kantian sense to ensure the *status quo* for coming generations. Whoever breaks a generational contract of his own accord is not merely breaching a contract but, by consciously violating duties towards those who will come after him, is ultimately acting irrationally. In particular in the discussion about demographics and pensions, this dilemma in sustainability ethics is deepened when individuals today seek to profit at the expense of future generations by talking of terminating a "generational contract".

4.2 Dilemma 2: Future-Oriented and Sustainable Distribution of Resources

There must also be a broad ethical discussion about absolute or comparative standards of a maximally equitable distribution of resources on this planet. The ethical dilemma here is that one part of the world is consuming the resources of another part of the world without the two parties meeting each other. This dilemma of global resource distribution leads, after a discussion of the concept of risk, to a further core concept of sustainability and justice and so to the question: "What distribution of goods and opportunities between present and future persons is a just distribution?" This directs attention to intra- and intergenerational justice as a further central principle in sustainability, along with responsibility and a future-oriented management of risk (Kersting 2000). While intragenerative justice postulates equal opportunities regarding access to basic goods, the possibility of satisfying fundamental needs and participation in social decision-making processes, the principle of intergenerative justice refers to a distribution that, in the face of the limited carrying capacity of the ecosystem, will preserve life over the long term.

When answering the question whether absolute or relative standards lead to a more just distribution between present and future generations, John Rawls's (1921–2002) *Theory of Justice* (1971) serves as an example of how ethics can help structure the resulting ethically complex distribution dilemmata sustainable economic activity faces, not only economically but also ecologically and socially. At the core is the question "which principles for institutions that regulate distribution would people agree to in a decision-making process based on fair conditions" (Nida-Rümelin and Ozmen 2007, p. 654). This question is ethically relevant not least because it is prior to the question about the good. The good can only be determined subject to what is just. And the problem of justice in turn refers not only to individual action but also to the social norming of rights and duties in the distribution of goods. People are, according to Rawls, rational beings, and their actions are driven by the search for individual advantage in social cooperation as well as for a greatest possible share in social goods. A solution to this tension between the common good and self-interest is, according to Rawls, found in a concept of justice that all members of society can agree to.

In an intergenerational perspective, Rawls's approach can be extended to the question how it is possible to not only fairly distribute goods among living persons and groups but also among different generations, that is, if we are to act justly how much we should concede future generations from what is currently available. In a similar direction Ott and Döring develop Rawls's approach and outline an "intertemporal extension of John Rawls's theory of justice, in which behind the veil of ignorance the representatives do not know which generation they belong to" (Christen 2011, p. 35). This shift in perspective makes Rawls's theory of justice highly relevant for sustainability discourse. For Rawls a criterion of justice will only be agreed to if natural, social and individual realities are put to one side and the influence of individual preferences and beliefs are curbed. He creates this situation in a thought experiment he names the *original position*, in which the parties do not know their own identity or interests. "Although the decision-making persons or parties do know general facts about psychology or social sciences they do not know who they are; they do not know their gender, age, status, class, race or ethnicity; they do not know which natural talents

(such as intelligence or bodily strength) they have nor which social, cultural and religious milieu has shaped them. They also know nothing about their beliefs about good or their psychological inclinations – they decide behind a veil of ignorance" (Nida-Rümelin and Ozmen 2007, p. 656). All the relevant information for determining biased criteria of justice are unavailable to the parties making the decision, assuring their impartiality and thus creating a situation in which "since the differences among the parties are unknown to them, and everyone is equally rational and similarly situated, each is convinced by the same arguments" (Rawls 1976, p. 139). If this thought experiment is supplemented by an intergenerational perspective, the membership of the parties making the decision in a particular generation – whether it is the present or some future one – is hidden behind the veil of ignorance. Under these circumstances, none of the parties can be certain whether the solution they prefer is beneficial for their or for another generation nor whether they will have to suffer the negative consequences of their decisions or first coming generations would. In Rawls's thought experiment, the parties behind a veil of ignorance would agree to two principles of justice.

John Rawls's Principles of Justice

First Principle

Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second Principle

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:

(a) To the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the savings principle
(b) Attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity

First Priority Rule (The Priority of Liberty)

The principles of justice are to be ranked in lexical order and therefore liberty can only be restricted for the sake of liberty.

There are two cases:

(a) A less extensive liberty must strengthen the total system of liberty shared by all.
(b) A less than equal liberty must be acceptable to those with the lesser liberty.

Second Priority Rule (The Priority of Justice over Efficiency and Welfare)

The second principle of justice is lexically prior to the principle of efficiency and to that of maximising the sum of advantages, and fair opportunity is prior to the difference principle. There are two cases:

(a) An inequality of opportunity must enhance the opportunities of those with the lesser opportunity.
(b) An excessive rate of saving must on balance mitigate the burden of those bearing this hardship.

(Rawls 1976, pp. 302–3)

The first principle, which determines the distribution of basic political goods, civil and human rights together with fundamental liberties on a strictly egalitarian basis, is prior to the second and must not be "restricted in favour of the greater efficiency of the economic and social system" (Nida-Rümelin and Ozmen 2007, p. 658). The second principle governs the distribution of basic socioeconomic goods and also makes use of egalitarian distribution as the basis for evaluating possible improvements in their distribution. Unequal distribution is only permissible if it leads to an improvement for all, especially those in the worst off group in a society. In the original position, economic and social relations are evaluated using the efficiency principle so that a situation is considered Pareto optimal if no one can be made better off without making someone else worse off. If generation membership is also included behind the veil of ignorance in the original position, then there is a solution to the demand that no generation should be worse off than another. However, since some efficient distributions go against intuitions of justice, the so-called difference principle is needed to choose among equally efficient, unequal distributions the one that is just to the extent that it contributes to "enhance the opportunities of those with the lesser opportunity" (Rawls 1976, p. 303). As a result any rational person would require as high a minimum as possible for the group with the least opportunities, since he could be a member of this group himself.

This approach leads back to the core of the debate about sustainability and the question, with reference to Kant, as to whether there can be duties towards future generations and whether these – returning to the issue of distributive justice that was the starting point of the case study – also have universal validity. From an intergenerational perspective, each generation would have to have the least possible disadvantage, in the Rawlsian sense, from the decisions and actions of earlier generations if there was to be a just distribution of goods and opportunities. In this context Ott and Döring also ask "whether future generations would have to receive the same amount as present generations have inherited (comparative standard) or whether it would also be just if they were guaranteed a certain minimum amount (absolute standard)" (Christen 2011, p. 35). They argue for a comparative intergenerational standard of distribution. Against this background, there is no longer any reason that people would be satisfied with an absolute minimum standard. The comparative standard is supplemented by an absolute standard, which for Ott and Döring is based on the so-called capability approach of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, according to which "all human beings should receive the opportunity to exercise certain basic capabilities in order to be able to live a human life" (Christen 2011, p. 36). By means of the absolute standard, it would be possible to ensure that "it will not be permissible for the quality of life to be less than a certain amount, not only now but also over time" (Christen 2011, p. 36). Sustainability can in this sense be reduced to the normatively grounded idea that "regardless of space and time all human beings should be guaranteed an absolute standard without this violating the comparative standard regarding future generations, that is, without future generations being worse off than the present generation" (Christen 2011, p. 36).

Often such debates about specific dilemmata of a just – national as well as global – distribution of goods and resources lead from the sustainability discourse

to categorical problems and central topoi of ethics, as, for example, Rawls introduces in his concept of just distribution with recourse to Kant and the utilitarians. What appears to be a purely economic problem about the fair use of natural resources becomes an ethical dilemma that cannot be solved with only the expertise of the World Bank and the IMF. Instead it requires a discussion of a universal ethics, such as Hans Küng and others are already involved in (Küng et al. 2010).

Task: Locate the concept of distributive justice in sustainability discourse. Where could there be a reference in this concept of justice to the approach of John Rawls and to the Kantian concept of duty?

Question: What are the similarities and differences between these two dilemmata?

5 Conclusion

It was Kant who in 1793 simply yet incisively formulated this fundamental question of anthropology as the fourth question of his philosophy: "What is a human being?" (Kant 1969, p. 429 and 1972, p. 25). In the Preface to his Logic, Kant observed that the three prior questions, concerning human knowledge, duty and hope, belong "in principle" to anthropology "because the first three questions are related to the last" (Kant 1972, p. 25). Whoever works on an approach to ethics will first clarify the anthropological and conceptual premises as carefully as possible: Who owes what to whom in the present and in the future? What does it mean to take a risk and how can its consequences be evaluated? What is a just distribution beyond the economic mechanism of distribution? No matter whether an ethics of sustainability is constructed on the basis of Aristotle or Kant, Jonas or Rawls or Marx or Habermas, ethics in general and sustainability ethics in particular are not an addendum, a decoration of business, science, technology or politics; it defines their reach and structures their options. Ethics is not supposed to explain the world to its corollary sciences but is instead an attempt to understand the premises and conditions of human action before it then ethically reflects, structures or criticises more or less moral actions. Sustainability ethics ultimately enquires in an Aristotelian sense into what it is that makes life meaningful and worth living and what makes it a "good" life and so a life that gives a human being their humanity. And it also enquires, following Kant, into what the duty of the individual is and how sustainable action can be rationally justified, not only in the present but over a period of time that far exceeds the life of a single person.

In the end sustainability as an ethical principle describes something similar to what Immanuel Kant describes with the term "reason", though with two particular features. Sustainability, and so also sustainability ethics, projects rational action over time. This temporal aspect has now become – ecologically, socially and economically – urgent and has led to the virulence of debates about sustainability; it can be explained by developments that were not foreseeable for Kant: by industrialisation and globalisation and all of its consequences. Whoever attempts to

reconcile the three major factors of production – land, labour and capital – in a discourse about the principles of distributive justice so that economic activity is sustainable over time and no excessive risks are taken will not have a problem accepting sustainability as a value and an intergenerational guideline, even if this description from a philosophical perspective is, at the latest since Heidegger's fundamental criticism of the concept of value as "positivistic substitute for metaphysics" (Heidegger 1977, p. 227), unclear.

Rudolf Schüßler draws attention to a further source of tension in the ethical debate about sustainability. He emphasises that the focus on the relationship between present and future generations rests on an individualistic understanding and that this viewpoint is incompatible with a communitarian social philosophy, which would argue that the compensation of interests and needs across generations is meaningless. Present generations, according to communitarians, have sufficiently fulfilled their duty if they leave the commonwealth, the *polis*, in a well-ordered state (Schüßler 2008, p. 65). It remains an open question what the standard for this well orderedness should be. In this sense sustainability ethics does not only reflect an anthropological image of human beings, their social responsibility or their duties but also the relationship of human beings to each other, to other generations and above all to their natural environment. They do not argue from a purely anthropocentric or biocentric perspective, but they assert the existence of ethical duties beyond geographical and intergenerational borders.

Whoever professes this principle of intergenerational justice and thus would like to grant coming generations similar life chances as those who are now alive will have to, behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance, make sacrifices, especially regarding the consumption of natural resources. Increasing efficiency and using resources more responsibly without freeing oneself from certain lifestyles habits will not be enough (Renn 2007, p. 95f). A crucial task of future ethics of sustainability will be to structure present as well as future actions in order to emphasise that all action – beyond all systemic limitations and supposed as well as actual constraints – is ultimately based on individual decisions and that ethically responsible action is also dependent on our understanding of what it means to be a human being and on the values of each and every actor, since we must ask ourselves – as did Kant – not in an anonymous collective "What ought we to do?" but as individuals and specifically "What should I do?"

Task: Attempt to define the concept "sustainability ethics" and describe its roots and the controversies it has caused. Exchange your views with other students.

Bibliography

Aristotle (1941) Nicomachean Ethics. 31st printing. Random House, New York

Bayertz K (1994) Praktische Philosophie als angewandte Ethik. In: Bayertz K (ed) Praktische Philosophie. Grundorientierungen angewandter Ethik. Rowohlt, Reinbek, pp 7–47

Birnbacher D (2006) Utilitarismus. In: Düwell M, Hübenthal C, Werner MH (eds) Handbuch Ethik. Metzler, Stuttgart, pp 95–107

Christen M (2011) Nachhaltigkeit als ethische Herausforderung. Inf Philos 2:34–43
Egeler R (2009) Statement auf der Pressekonferenz "Bevölkerungsentwicklung in Deutschland bis 2060" am 18. November 2009 in Berlin. Retrieved on 19 Mar 2012 unter. http://www.destatis.de/jetspeed/portal/cms/Sites/destatis/Internet/DE/Presse/pk/2009/Bevoelkerung/Statement__Egeler__PDF,property=file.pdf
Eisler R (2002) Pflicht. In: Eisler R (ed) Kant-Lexikon. Nachschlagewerk zu Kants sämtlichen Schriften, Briefen und handschriftlichem Nachlaß. Olms Verlag, Hildesheim u.a, pp 410–417
Federal Statistics Office (2009) Germany's population by 2060. Federal Statistics Office, Wiesbaden
Fenner D (2008) Ethik: Wie soll ich handeln? Francke, Tübingen
Fenner D (2010) Einführung in die Angewandte Ethik. Francke, Tübingen
Grober U (2010) Die Entdeckung der Nachhaltigkeit. Kulturgeschichte eines Begriffs. Kunstmann Verlag, München
Haus M (2003) Kommunitarismus. Einführung und Analyse. Westdeutscher Verlag, Wiesbaden
Heidegger M (1977) Nietzsches Wort "Gott ist tot". In: Heidegger M (ed) Holzwege. Klostermann Verlag, Frankfurt a.M, pp 209–267
Höffe O (2008) Einleitung. In: Höffe O (ed) Einführung in die utilitaristische Ethik. Klassische und zeitgenössische Texte. Francke Verlag, Tübingen, pp 7–51
Hübenthal C (2006) Teleologische Ansätze. In: Düwell M, Hübenthal C, Werner MH (eds) Handbuch Ethik. Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar, pp 61–68
Jonas H (1987a) Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M
Jonas H (1987b) Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Zur Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M
Kambartel F (1995) Prinzip. In J. Mittelstraß (ed) Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie, Bd. III. Metzler, Stuttgart u.a., p 341f
Kant I (1969) Brief an Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, 4.5.1793. In: Kant's gesammelte Schriften, hrsg. von der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin. Reprint of the Berlin und Leipzig edition 1923, vol XI
Kant I (1970) Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten. In: Kant I (ed) Werke in sechs Bänden. Published by W. Weischedel, vol IV. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt
Kant I (1972) Logik. In: Kant's gesammelte Schriften. Published by the Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Reprint of the Berlin und Leipzig edition 1922, vol IX
Kant I (1973) Kritik der reinen Vernunft. In: Kant's gesammelte Schriften. Published by the Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Reprint of the Berlin und Leipzig edition 1911, Bd. III
Kersting W (2000) Theorien sozialer Gerechtigkeit. Metzler, Stuttgart
Klemme HF (2009) Immanuel Kant. In: Bohlken E, Thies C (eds) Handbuch Anthropologie. Der Mensch zwischen Natur, Kultur und Technik. Metzler, Stuttgart u.a, pp 11–16
Küng H, Leisinger KM, Wieland J (2010) Globales Wirtschaftsethos: *Konsequenzen und Herausforderungen für die Weltwirtschaft*. Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München
Mieth D (2003) Was ist Nachhaltigkeit? Eine ethische Kursbestimmung. In: Bobbert M, Düwell M, Jax K (eds) Umwelt-Ethik-Recht. Francke, Tübingen/Basel, pp 182–201
Nida-Rümelin J (2005) Theoretische und angewandte Ethik: Paradigmen, Begründungen, Bereiche. In: Nida-Rümelin J (ed) Angewandte Ethik. Die Bereichsethiken und ihre theoretische Fundierung. Ein Handbuch. Kröner, Stuttgart, pp 2–87
Nida-Rümelin J, Ozmen E (2007) John Rawls. Eine Theorie der Gerechtigkeit. In: Brocker M (ed) Geschichte des politischen Denkens. Ein Handbuch. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M, pp 651–666
Ott K (1996) Vom Begründen zum Handeln. Aufsätze zur angewandten Ethik. Narr-Francke-Attempto-Verlag, Tübingen
Ott K (1997) Umweltethik in schwieriger Zeit. In Ott K (ed.) Umweltethik in schwieriger Zeit. Antrittsvorlesung von Prof. Dr. Konrad Ott und Reden von Prof. Dr. Jürgen Kohler u.a. Festschrift anlässlich der Antrittsvorlesung von Dr. Konrad Ott, Professor für Umweltethik an dem Stiftungslehrstuhl der Michael Otto Stiftung an der Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität in Greifswald am 17. Oktober 1997. Michael-Otto-Stiftung für Umweltschutz, Hamburg, pp 51–88

Ott K, Döring R (2008) Theorie und Praxis starker Nachhaltigkeit. Metropolis-Verlag, Marburg
Ott K (2010) Umweltethik zur Einführung. Junius, Hamburg
Patzig G (1971) Ethik ohne Metaphysik. Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, Göttingen
Pieper A (2007) Einführung in die Ethik. Francke, Tübingen/Basel
Pieper A, Thurnherr U (1998) Einleitung. In: Pieper A, Thurnherr U (eds) Angewandte Ethik. Eine Einführung. Beck, München, pp 7–13
Rapp C (2006) Aristoteles. In: Düwell M, Hübenthal C, Werner MH (eds) Handbuch Ethik. Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar, pp 69–81
Rawls J (1976) A Theory of Justice. Oxford University Press, Oxford
Renn O (2007) Ethische Anforderungen an eine Nachhaltige Entwicklung: Zwischen globalen Zwängen und individuellen Handlungsspielräumen. In: Altner G, Michelsen G (eds) Ethik und Nachhaltigkeit: Grundsatzfragen und Handlungsperspektiven im universitären Agendaprozess. Verlag für akademische Schriften, Frankfurt a.M, pp 64–99
Rogall H (2003) Akteure der nachhaltigen Entwicklung. Der ökologische Reformstau und seine Gründe. Ökom-Verlag, München
Rogall H (2008) Ökologische Ökonomie. Eine Einführung. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften/ GWV Fachverlage GmbH, Wiesbaden
Schüßler R (2008) Nachhaltigkeit und Ethik. In: Kahl W (ed) Nachhaltigkeit als Verbundbegriff. Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, pp 60–79
Schwemmer O (2005) Anthropologie. In: Mittelstraß J (Hrsg) Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie, vol I. Metzler, Stuttgart, u.a., pp 153–157.
Statistisches Bundesamt (ed) (2009) Bevölkerung Deutschlands bis 2060. Begleitmaterial zur Pressekonferenz am 18. November 2009 in Berlin. Retrieved on 19 Mar 2012 at: http://www.destatis.de/jetspeed/portal/cms/Sites/destatis/Internet/DE/Presse/pk/2009/Bevoelkerung/pressebroschuere__bevoelkerungsentwicklung2009,property=file.pdf
Thurnherr U (2000) Angewandte Ethik zur Einführung. Junius, Hamburg
Unnerstall H (1999) Rechte zukünftige Generationen. Königshausen u. Neumann, Würzburg
Weber M (1992) Politik als Beruf. Reclam, Stuttgart