

What is the ethical foundation for planning a more sustainable future?

Dr Michael Booth
Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy
Murdoch University

Michael has taught in the Social Sciences at Murdoch University since the mid-1970s. He was chairperson of Murdoch's interdisciplinary Politics, Philosophy and Sociology programme (PPS), before joining the Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy in 1993.

What sustained Murdoch University initially, and has resurfaced in several of its parts in recent years, is an *ethos* of cooperation, collaboration and consideration. These I believe are what we need for planning a more sustainable future. I am sure that ethics is more about creating a certain ethos, than it is about creating or justifying a list of does and don'ts. By thinking through what I value most at Murdoch – my own workplace – I have tried to bring that ethos, which the university never defined but has never quite lost a sense for, into focus for thinking about sustainability. The future of a society is not simply about achievements, standards, prizes and expertise, but about what is done with these. Similarly, although there are reasons for stressing excellence in a university, the outcomes depend more on what is done with the skills acquired.

Beyond judgments and gradings, a society has to be about how it is changing. Rules and regulations, criteria for accuracy and scholarship, do not produce sustainability. They can only register and order the inputs. Living, both now and in the future depends on the pattern of our relationships. How we understand, develop and nurture these is the crux of whether we can survive as a sustainable society, a society with a sustainable future.

My belief in the importance of an ethos of cooperation, collaboration and consideration over rules, regulations comes partly or even primarily from my experience of what succeeds as 'teaching' at Murdoch. I was appointed to the university to run classes in world change and human development. I used to imagine that standing up and passing on my knowledge (of diverse areas) was what my teaching was about. Now I stand back more and let students exchange with each other. I set a topic, but it is fairly wide: e.g. what do you learn through play? how do you get to know someone? And then I only 'give' a lecture after they have shared with each other. Students say: e.g. "I appreciate how much of yourself you put into the classes" yet I notice I seem to be saying less and participating with them more. Indeed we have a break with tea and biscuits (where they talk avidly to each other) and this has higher priority than making sure another theorist enters their minds. When students write: "we're sorry the class is over," I think it is the chance to explore fundamental themes about relationships that they miss, themes that extend to concerns for waste in society, production without thoughtfulness, consumerist values and teenage angst. With drug-taking and suicides in the background, they are searching for theories about a future young people can warm towards.

Building relationships means respecting what others say. It means having a way to conceive how their understanding has reached a different position to our own. The

system or *ethos* of relationships is too complex and elaborate to be captured simply by money, by prestige, by status. If we can enhance students' capacity for understanding each other, experience at coping with complexities is likely to follow. Cooperation, collaboration and consideration in a teaching context are all significant in achieving this.

It is the same in moving towards sustainable practices on Earth. We cannot ignore most of what the other has as their complexities and simply do our thing. Most damage occurs from a failure of fellow-feeling. Approaching any person merely instrumentally diminishes them, and makes us less aware of what together with them we do. Most damage to the Earth then occurs through social arrangements built up over two centuries of liberal, capitalist society, all aiming for personal worth and personal freedom, but expressing this only in abstract and impersonal terms. The belief that life has to be competitive that until recently we tended to take for granted, is based finally on instrumentally counting some as winners, and others as losers. This has turned consideration for others into an 'ideal', cooperation into an accounting system, and collaboration into the exercise of countable skills.

Votes and profits and following regulations are at present the glues of westernised societies. Cooperation and collaboration are drawn upon primarily for work and sport, business and leisure pursuits, but all of these still mostly revolve around competition. Churches, folk dancing, bushwalking and music can often provide for something more. Perhaps we should draw more upon their ethos for the wider society. People will use their skills in sustainable practices once there is an ethos of developing and facilitating interactions. People need to act together in concert on a more complex basis than exchanges of votes, of money or even of qualifications (you pass the tests and I will regulate for you to be an X). To empower these skills means countering the invisible ethos urging each to maximise what they use. People count their worth in terms clear to banks and accountants. Legal outcomes for reconciling people to damage are counted in monetary terms. Our society will continue diminishing the natural resources we share until each of us enters into a spirit of collaboration, is overtly agreeable to cooperation and sees outcomes in terms of consideration for others.

Universities generally share in the western world's belief that what makes a place successful is the expertise of its members. Those who are graded most highly are let loose on the world with the *imprimatur* of the university's respect and authority, and it is to those that the society tends to look for guiding developments in subsequent years. The key to the relationship between university staff and students is thought to be the knowledge or skills those staff pass on through the units students take. Yet it is the ability to get along with a wide variety of people, to nurture development for those others and to bring teams into being that plays a larger role than knowledge per se in all institutions. In any specific area it is wisdom we value. Statements condense the complexity of lifeworlds into an abstract space of words. Wisdom stems rather from more widely appreciating the basis for people's differences. The theorist, Donna Haraway, suggests it is not 'knowledge' but *knowledges* that we have to acknowledge, and only bringing these together can lead to anything like objectivity. We need for this an ethos of relatedness, of wisdom.

Only through reflection on what we have taken for granted as liberal (ensuring individual freedom) and capitalist (helping to accumulate the capital for production) can we move as a society to a new ethos. We won't get this reflection if our 'experts' are economists solely, or philosophers or social theorists or policy analysts. No one 'discipline' creates an ethos for reflecting on this diversity of skills. I have suggested that an ethos of cooperation, collaboration and consideration in some subsections of our universities is providing some work on this. We need a similar ethos throughout the society.

There are signs that such an ethos is happening. Ecology has shown **what** we are ignoring. Some researchers in sociology, psychology and economics are asking **why** we are ignoring the damage. From quantum physicists (I think of David Bohm) to retired politicians (Mary Robinson) there is a questioning of the basis for a shared humanity, and a concern for methods for alleviating barriers to this. Complex organisations are beginning to recognise that much of the knowledges they contain are usually tacit, an insight from Michael Polanyi's work.

What people carry away from schools and universities with the greatest outcome for us all are their actions towards each other. What they feel towards the society in which they live should be our measure of education's success. Organisations in the wider society are beginning to provide models for this. Although each addition to a workforce has to be justified in the marketplace, there is today more of a spirit of relating to the customer, showing responsibility for the product and aiming corporately to be a socially responsible citizen. Fairly recently only regulations seemed able to make organisations work through their responsibilities, now it is good business practice to do so. We can build on the spirit of these developments to nurture an ethos more conducive to sharing, and knowing that we are sharing.

At the heart of an ethos for sustainability is a climate of warmth and width of response. Hobbesian fears of human nature have hindered this for far too long. We need, not a neutral public sphere but one sharing much with the domestic, and recognising its reliance on this. Corporations are increasingly turning towards a practical ethos of bringing together diverse points of view. They tend still to characterise this as 'teamwork' and to talk of 'knowledge management'. We need more corporations developing their own ethos in a spirit of recognition for innovation and teamwork at local levels. They should provide opportunities for this, and appropriate training.

Managers (and those taking on leadership roles) will sometimes claim that structures affect people most. They forget that it is people's acts that are the expression of those structures and that for them to work must mean people's practice of them is endemic. People with power can view subordinates as people who can be shifted around at will, with subsequent loss of corporate knowledge, of endemic memory and of time-saving networks. They encourage an ethos of neutrality and positionality. I have parodied this above as rules, rorts and regulations. Meanwhile people at subordinate levels rarely keep solidly to the explicit rules, indeed this notoriously leads to havoc, as working-to-rule actions show. When people find a structure too unyielding they are likely to leave or to hide what they do. For those who stay the structures of their place are merely a basis for what they then build up through local adaptations. The structures are not the ethos, and they cannot be a basis for people's wiser acts.

We relate to others in a 'business-as-usual' sense formally through rules and regulations, and then wonder over stories of the sorts that have taken place everywhere, from politicians, to bankers, to police forces to the catholic church. People need to see in another person someone who is as diverse and full of meanings and feelings as themselves. If the other is merely a placeholder within a complex system, then the benefits of hierarchy begin to dominate over actual achievements. It is then through politics that some win, some lose. Organisational life becomes, not just a lottery but a competition, a sport. In place of competition there has to be cooperation – taking on common tasks, collaboration – working side-by-side, and consideration – reflecting on how the other is placed. We need to highlight the informal and become aware how it is transcending 'business-as-usual'.

Recent moves towards efficiency have often interfered with the time that needs to be provided so that people understand each other better. The race against the clock time of male competitions, of business, sport and politics, of getting away from the herd, of pouncing on the opportunities, all rule our public lives. But public life is inevitably still full of personal politics, personal antagonisms, strong friendships, and the relations of give and take present in the cyclical time of domestic nurturing. The domestic ethos involves sensing the needs of members of the family or neighbourhood but provides less cogent and exciting metaphors than do races, competitions and sports. Collaborating and cooperating in the home provides times for meditation, for creative outcomes, for increasing understanding. Practices in the home that work to nourish and accept others are a sound basis for a public ethos that considers Earth processes as cyclical sustainers of human life and all life.

Murdoch University as a public institution similarly goes beyond specific neutral structures in its local patterns of continuity. Partly this is built out of the shared experiences, underpinned by a collaborative ethos, of those who have stayed in the place for many years. If our graduating students had no sense of the institution's continuity and of the university as a place with some ethos, we would have failed them except technically. The university as an institution falls or survives through its ethos and indeed its soul. However embarrassing and hard to articulate *ethos* and soul may be, they are certainly present. They are not expressed by such empty and embarrassingly obvious sentiments as "striving for excellence". A need for some positive articulation of what that ethos involves, has prompted my reflection here on sustainability. In WA society at large you will also find other locations with comparable adaptability and continuity of spirit. When institutions have an ethos encouraging relating respectfully and sharing in common tasks they are more likely to approach Earth and others in a sustainable way that promotes cooperation, collaboration and consideration.

Most people will join others in adopting new stances, forming new concepts and building up fresh structures, once the starting point of their own relating has produced trust and understanding. Ethical stances borrowed from various cultures and religions, and the consequent diverse ways of placing humans in relation to being, can then be drawn upon wisely. Multiple political models for structuring can be tried out resourcefully, and a philosophical plethora of flexible concepts can be tested for whether they enable people to live and work with others with understanding. The key to sustainability is in the ethos providing the starting point for that trust. It cannot be

competition, for this will encourage the formulation of rules, regulations and, as we see now even in sport, sports. It has to be one of cooperating in creating a shared sense of what is being attempted, collaborating in the tasks of the attempt and throughout experiencing and sharing consideration for how each contributor is placed.