

Book Review

THE VIRTUES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Xiaojun Xiang and Qiong Li♦

Jason Kawall. ed. *The Virtues of Sustainability*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 312 pp. ISBN (13): 978-0-190-91982-5.

Abstract: This insightful volume, *The Virtues of Sustainability*, divided into three sections, binds together recently commissioned essays by renowned scholars belonging to a wide array of disciplines spanning philosophy and political science to psychology and religious studies. The first section explores mainly significant factors and structures crucial for fostering the virtues of sustainability. The essays in the second section zoom in on virtues adopted by the non-Western cultures and communities. The third section focuses more on sustainability virtues comprising cooperativeness, conscientiousness, patience, open-mindedness and creativity. Overall, these essays enrich the readers with an understanding of the significance of the virtues of substantiality and real-life guidance to achieving a goal of being a full-rounded, sane-minded, cooperative global citizen.

Keywords: Virtues, Sustainability, Cooperativeness, Patience, Conscientiousness.

Sustainability covers three main branches of environmental, social and economic systems. The environmental aspect of sustainability is all about the betterment of ecosystems of health and service, the preservation of species and habitats and the widespread malaise to curtail the devastating effects of human actions and activities. The

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social aspect encourages humanity to work to attain social equality, maintain functional social structures, and eradicate environmental and social injustices to build secure and robust communities. The economic dimension of sustainability aims for economic systems capable of providing employment and technological innovation for the betterment of the environment and society. Society needs to recognize the significance of each pillar and its interconnectedness.

Jason Kawall, in this work, argues that the sustainable future requires efforts from both the individual and institutional levels. Nurturing the virtue of environmental care should be cultivated from childhood. The global concern for the preservation of nature and the environment, especially in view of global warming and the more frequent occurrences of natural disasters in the 21st-century zeitgeist, has found its way into mainstream media and the general human consciousness. However, this concern for the environment and the natural world is not new. Followers of old religions like Jainism have practised non-violence for animals and nature for centuries. Some ancient and modern great leaders such as Mahavir, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Sunderlal Bahuguna, and Nelson Mandela embraced non-violent Ecology.

This book worryingly contends that humanity has not attached itself to the virtue of ecological sustainability and continues exploiting natural resources irreparably. This is in sharp contrast to our promises of greener ecology and reduction in carbon emissions. The wheels of ecologically devastating industrialization are chugging away, and the competing nations' rat race for amassing more wealth through overproduction is ongoing. People show little respect for the environment when they heat their homes on fossil fuels, eat meals with disposable plastics, and drain chemicals down the sink. There is a dire need for instilling the virtues of sustainability in the hearts and minds of younger generations. All good societies and communities should encourage their citizens to internalize respect for nature. Our relationship with nature should be lively, wholesome and interactive, and 'thoughtful rediscovery of wisdom and insight' may be rekindled. A planetary emergency may be declared to reign in the onslaught of human-generated activities.

Toyohiko Kagawa, one of the essay contributors of this book and the nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature, highlighted the role of the virtue of cooperativeness in the restoration of the planet of the pre-industrialization era. Cooperativeness is a multifaceted virtue, dependent on other virtues like respect, kindness, attentiveness, justice, forgiveness, and community-mindedness. These virtues are nurtured individually as well as collectively. There are multiple levels of cooperativeness: cooperativeness among humans, cooperativeness with the land, e.g., reforestation of barren lands. The whole community can reap the benefits of getting woods and fruits from the forests, generating a wave of prosperity.

The book draws our attention to the virtue of patience and how patience and sustainability are inseparably interconnected. Patience does not mean indefinite passive waiting or unflinching resignation for all the problems and challenges the world is confronted with. The virtue of patience is cultivated through active persistence and fortitude in action. Patience does not stop us from urgently tackling enormous problems such as climate change. Societies exercise patience while pressuring their governments to do more on pressing environmental crises. Even though they are the least carbon emitters, countries that are hit hard by climate change still show restraint while urging the G-7 countries, the principal polluters of the planet, to change their priorities and shift from fossil fuel consumption to greener, sustainable, and cleaner energies. Without the virtue of patience, humanity is all set to be bogged down by despair and burnout, diminishing hopes for a better sustainable future.

The writer rightfully points out that societies are to work on multiple levels to attain sustainability. Major cultural changes will need decades of persistent efforts before they come to fruition. Undoubtedly, some goals can be achieved in the immediate future. Securing a safe habitat for an endangered species or improving the public transportation system for the less privileged sections of the society can be the goals that can be realized in the short term. Every goal needs its own appropriate scale and timeframe. Everlasting inner strength and steadfastness in the face of failure, frustration, and suffering are the most underrated virtues.

The book beautifully spotlights various hidden yet very significant virtues of sustainability for greater comprehension of the audience. One such virtue is conscientiousness, which dictates aligning oneself with the greater good of society over self-interested objectives. Individuals, as the foundational stones of a society, should sacrifice their lifestyle choices that are injurious to the health of the environment and the planet. Giving up on gas-guzzling trendy cars and abstaining from filling up the wardrobes with fashionable clothes are some of the conscientious actions we can take to reduce CO₂ emissions, which are accelerating global warming. The burden of responsibility in this regard lies on the shoulders of the first-world countries. People living in these countries should adopt low-impact behaviours, thus minimizing their ecological footprints. The benefits society reaps from this collective sane-minded conscientiousness should be available to all. The conscientious universal citizenry is the need of the hour in the global village the world has become, and to live together harmoniously and sustainably as one large family on our only refuge in the universe: the blue planet. Similarly, the intellectual virtues of open-mindedness and creativity can be cultivated for equitable and just societies. Creativity can be learned as a skill with practice. Moreover, a positive societal and physical environment boosts the expression of ethical and environmental virtues.

This book is also not without its flaws. First, the book was unable to present real-life solutions to material and mundane challenges we face as a society. Second, the writer overplayed the role of virtues and erroneously declared them a panacea for all the problems of the world, ignoring the scientific and technological advancements such as carbon capture and storage, which can be instrumental in tackling global warming. Despite these shortcomings, the editor Jason Kawall deserves appreciation for putting together this wonderful book. This seminal multidisciplinary work is worthy of recommendation to students of environment, ecology, sociology and ethics. The book is distinguished for its lucid presentation, well-formed structuring and meaningful discussions.