



# Sustainability, *The Complete Concept*

*Environment,  
Healthcare, and Economy*

Hunter Lewis

*Most of us would agree* that the principal difference between children and real adults is that the latter look ahead, consider consequences, act responsibly and sustainably.

Sustainability is not, however, just the essence of maturity. It is also the essence of morality.

In his book, *Moral Foundations*, the ornithologist, naturalist, and philosopher Alexander Skutch observed that:

“People ... might tell us that ... morality ... is not lying, not stealing, not killing, not coveting, not cheating, [not] ... injuring one’s neighbor. If asked what common feature unites all these interdicted activities, they would find it difficult to answer. They might say that all these forbidden activities cause people pain... This is true enough, but ... competition in trade or the professions brings much loss and sorrow to those who fail in it; ... the punishment of children makes them unhappy; and the practice of medicine and dentistry are abundant sources of pain even to those who ultimately benefit... The common feature which unites the activities most consistently forbidden by the moral codes of civilized peoples is that by their very nature they cannot be both habitual and enduring, because they tend to destroy the conditions which make them possible.”

Sustainability is therefore the essence of both maturity and morality. It is also the foundation for human happiness. As the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus wrote:

“The ... chief good is care in avoiding undesired consequences. Such prudence is more precious than philosophy itself, for all the other virtues spring from it. It teaches that it is impossible to live pleasantly without also living prudently, honestly, and justly; [nor is it possible to lead a life of prudence, honor, and justice] and not live pleasantly. For the virtues are closely associated with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life cannot be separated from them.”

## *Environmental Sustainability*

In today's world, the ethic of sustainability is usually voiced by environmentalists. They constantly remind us, in the words of the 1987 Brundtland Commission, that we cannot meet our own needs by making it impossible for future generations to meet theirs. To live prudently, honorably, justly, and happily, we must:

- Consume more intelligently, taking special care with our use of non-renewable resources;
- Protect the earth from man-made poisons, toxins, and waste;
- Conserve our air, fresh water, oceans, forests, wetlands, farmland, wildlands, wildlife, and all the other natural systems that sustain us and give us so much pleasure and beauty;
- Develop green technologies, business practices, and personal habits that will help us to become genuine guardians and stewards of nature.

Environmentalism is often dismissed as impractical or even utopian. But the opposite is true. Once the Chinese and other people living in emerging economies reach the same income level as Americans, can we imagine that they would all be able to consume as much or throw away as much as Americans today? At that point, as Lester Brown has pointed out, it would take all the paper the world produces today just to meet Chinese demand. Would there be any trees left?

To return to Alexander Skutch's point, an anti-environmental stance "cannot be both habitual and enduring, because [it will] tend to destroy the conditions which make [it] possible." To reject an ethic of sustainability is not consistent with maturity, morality, logic, or happiness.

Environmentalism is pointing us in the right direction. Yet, oddly, even environmentalists do not always apply the ethic of sustainability to other aspects of their lives, both individual and social. Consider, for example, first, healthcare, and then the financial economy.

## *Sustainable Healthcare*

The term “sustainable healthcare” was first used by Dr. Robert Verkerk, a PhD food scientist who founded the Alliance for Natural Health (anhcampaign.org) in 2002. Dr. Verkerk defined it as:

*“A complex system of interacting approaches to the restoration, management and optimization of human health that have an ecological base, that are environmentally, economically, and socially viable indefinitely, that work harmoniously both with the human body and the non-human environment ... ”*

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It will be immediately apparent that much of healthcare today is not sustainable. In the first place, and most obviously, it is not financially sustainable. In the United States especially, health costs that in 1970 consumed 7% of gross domestic product now consume 18%, and, on their present trajectory, could easily reach 25% or more as the aging postwar baby boomers enter old age.

Why are medical care costs soaring? In purely financial terms, it is quite simple. Since government began subsidizing medical care in the 1960s, demand has steadily increased. Guaranteed universal health coverage would of course increase demand further. Supply, on the other hand, has not increased, partly because of government rules and regulations. Even the most elementary economics tells us that steadily rising demand along with restricted supply will lead to higher and higher costs.

How then does government restrict the supply of healthcare? Some of the ways are quite obvious. Only doctors are allowed to do work which nurses and other healthcare professionals could do just as well. Starting new medical schools on US soil is made almost impossible. Doctors who step outside the approved mainstream of synthetic drugs and surgery too often lose their licenses. Only synthetic, patentable, and therefore hugely expensive drugs are approved and paid for by Medicare, Medicaid, and the Veteran's Administration. Natural (and inexpensive) nutraceuticals that might serve as well (or better) than drugs are very rarely approved or paid for.

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The almost complete reliance on synthetic and expensive drugs is the great “catch 22” of American medicine. It costs so much to gain FDA approval that only synthetic drugs new to planet earth and the human body, and therefore patentable, are submitted to the FDA. But, precisely because they lack FDA approval, effective and inexpensive natural medicines are barred from the system.

For example, when cherry growers tried to cite research from Harvard and elsewhere about the health benefits of cherries, they were immediately enjoined by the FDA. The agency took the position that even an accurate recital of valid science was “false advertising” if it involved health “claims,” and that the only way for cherry growers to make health “claims” would be to take cherries through the drug approval process. If cherries made it through this process, they would thenceforth be regulated by the FDA not as foods, but as a drug.

Partly because, unlike cherries, drugs are non-natural, they are often very toxic. Adverse drug reactions are the fourth ranking cause of death in the US according to the FDA itself. [www.fda.gov/CDER/drugreactions.] (Medical errors in general are either the third or first ranking cause of death, according to different studies. Gary Null, et al, argue for the first ranking in a groundbreaking book, *Death by Medicine*, to be published by Praktikos Books in January 2010.)

Both the drug industry and exponents of a more economical, natural, and sustainable healthcare agree on the importance of preventive medicine. But for the drug industry (and it seems most of the current medical establishment), preventive medicine means using high tech and often invasive tests to diagnose conditions (conditions, not illnesses) that must be treated with more and more drugs at an earlier and earlier age.

One of the greatest ironies of healthcare is that many environmentalists pursue healthy lifestyles, eat carefully, exercise, use dietary supplements, shop at health food stores—yet also support the US Food and Drug Administration, an agency that is aligned with drug companies and appears determined to suppress more natural and sustainable forms of healthcare. This is probably because environmentalists are accustomed to thinking of government regulation as a “good thing” and government regulators such as the Environmental Protection Agency as necessary watchdogs of industry. What these particular environmentalists fail to see is that the FDA is no EPA, that it has been captured by a particular industry, and that it is a foe rather than a supporter of the broader ethic to protect nature and live as naturally and sustainably as we can.

## *Sustainable Finance*

It is a commonplace that environmentalists will have a hard time convincing people to protect the earth and live sustainably if the economy is failing, if people are unable to find jobs or are losing the jobs they have. Yet many environmentalists support economic policies that are clearly unsustainable.

Most of us understand intuitively that it is unsustainable for our debts to grow faster than our income. For the US as a whole, this means that debt cannot grow faster than gross domestic product. Yet debt has been growing faster than GDP for many years.

During the 1980s, US government debt grew unsustainably. During the 1990s dot-com bubble, business debt became unsustainable. During the 2000s housing bubble, it was government debt again, but especially consumer debt. Then, when the housing bubble burst in the Crash of 2008, government debt soared along with contingent liabilities and guarantees totaling much more than an entire year's GDP.

Since 2008, government leaders all over the world have essentially told their citizens that:

- Too much debt is the problem, so we will pile on much more new debt.
- We can restore our confidence by doing more of what got us in trouble in the first place.
- If the public is refusing to borrow and spend anymore, their government will do it for them.

The head of the US's own Congressional Budget Office, appointed by Democrats, says that the Obama Administration's healthcare plan may be financially unsustainable. [*Weekly Standard*, August 10, 2009, p. 9]. The administration's budget plans—also unsustainable. [Bloomberg News, June 28, 2009] The administration itself is projecting budget deficits right into 2017 when the costs of Medicare and Social Security will start to explode because of the aging population.

How did the US, indeed the world, get into this position of just piling debt on debt without, apparently, any ability to stop and pull back from the abyss? A superficial explanation of The Crash of 2008 came from President Bush—that “Wall Street got drunk.” The Democrats quickly added that Wall Street got drunk because government regulators were asleep. But we have to look deeper than this. We have to ask where the shot drinks came from that Wall Street downed in order to get drunk. Wall Street, after all, may be greedy, heedless, live-for-today much of the time, but we do not have major crashes very often.

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John Maynard Keynes said that Wall Street runs on “animal spirits.” Government, in sharp contrast, he thought able to make decisions based on “long views” and “collective wisdom.” Yet even Keynes, in a private moment, characterized politicians as “utter boobies.”

The truth is that, in America today, Wall Street and Washington have formed an alliance that serves each others’ short term purposes. Wall Street gets cheap credit, engineered by the US Federal Reserve, the real source of the drunken behavior, and Washington gets a tsunami of campaign contributions each election cycle. The alliance began long before the Crash of 2008. Indeed, the alliance may be said to have caused the Crash. But this example of crony capitalism has been reinforced, not weakened, by recent events.

At the moment, it appears that Washington has become the senior partner, the dominant player, in this alliance. But this may be only for the moment. Before long, Wall Street may be back in the saddle, with an even deeper relationship with Washington to exploit.

Why does the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke, act as the chief enabler, the dependable source of cheap cash, for the gamblers of Wall Street and the big spenders (and borrowers) in Washington? He is a respected academic and surely no crony capitalist. He may wish to be reappointed, as his predecessor Alan Greenspan ardently wished to be reappointed. But, even if true, that is only a part of the story.

Bernanke, like Greenspan, is a Keynesian. Unlike Greenspan, he is also a Keynesian true believer. Keynes's most central conviction was that the government should print enough new money to bring interest rates down to the vanishing point, eventually to zero, and to keep them there. Keynes essentially believed, as the 19th century French socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon believed, in free credit as the magical route to limitless prosperity.

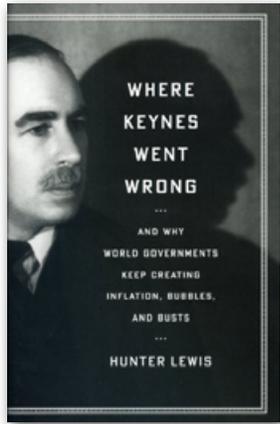
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If anyone doubts this summary of Keynes, it is in his *General Theory* (see especially p. 220-21 and 376). Keynes's general plan was to create booms and to keep them going indefinitely with ever cheaper money. The world has now operated on Keynesian principles since World War II, but especially during the last two decades, and, instead of limitless boom, we have gotten inflation (1970s), bubble (1990s and 2000s), and bust (2000 and 2008).

As of today, the Chinese government in particular is trying to blow up a new bubble, with much help from the US, and less from Europe. This new bubble will just add even more debt to the tottering structure of old debt, and sooner or later lead to another and even worse crash.

In the past, environmentalists have been focused on an old, outdated argument between laissez-faire capitalism and regulated capitalism, including environmental regulation. But going forward, the real question in economics is whether or not we will insist that both government and business pursue sane and sustainable policies, not policies that defy common sense and destroy the very fabric of our economic life.

Whether one looks at our ailing planet, our ever less affordable healthcare, or our failing economy, we see the same underlying problem: a rejection of maturity in favor of a childish refusal to look ahead. What we need instead is a more complete and all-encompassing concept of sustainability. Once we have that, all of us, but especially we environmentalists, need to embrace this broader concept as our guiding principle. 🌱



## BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Hunter Lewis's [Where Keynes Went Wrong](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hunter Lewis is the co-founder of Cambridge Associates LLC, a global investment firm, the author of *Where Keynes Went Wrong: And Why World Governments Keep Creating Inflation, Bubbles, and Busts* (October 1, 2009), and former chairman or treasurer of a variety of environmental organizations.

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