

Thinking about “Sustainability” and the Environment

An Interview between Craig Mitchell and Joseph E. Gorra

The ethics and economics of environmental “sustainability” is a challenging and pressing topic of discussion in U.S. and international politics. In this interview, ethicist Craig Mitchell offers an overview of some of the core concepts in this discussion and sketches how a “free market economics” approach can make a difference in light of a responsible anthropology, and the role of governmental power to regulate individual practices and industries.

“Sustainability” is a hot topic in academic, public policy, and political discussions on economics and the environment. One of your timely topics at Acton University addresses this issue. Can you give us a snapshot of what is meant by “sustainability”?

Sustainability is a problematic term. Its meaning depends on who you are talking to. If you are talking to most economists, it simply means balancing economic and environmental issues. If you are talking to most environmentalists who hold to “deep ecology,” it means socialism to serve the needs of the environment.

Deep ecology is a philosophical view on the environment. It is largely concerned with environmental ethics. More specifically, it argues that only what is good for the environment is good. Mankind is generally viewed in a negative light. In fact, some view man as a disease on the earth that should be culled or eradicated.

Most will acknowledge that as an economy grows, that there will be some level of pollution associated with it. The question is, “how much should there be?” Some would say that there should be no pollution at any level, regardless of what this does to economic health and growth. Others will argue that pollution below some level is tolerable. This is where the debate is, how much concern for the environment and how much for the economy.

What sort of anthropology ought to help underwrite this discussion?

Man is the steward of creation. He is free to use it to satisfy his needs. This includes economically. Nonetheless, man has a moral responsibility to protect the environment for his descendents.

Is there a role for the market when trying to account for and empower sustainability? How might we think about problems and prospects with the market in this area?

The market is the most efficient and the way to the most individual freedom. It is also the best way to protect the environment. Economists view things through the lens of the social optimum, marginal social costs and marginal social benefits. All of these are inherently moral, despite the claims of economists to the contrary. Other approaches turn out to be far more immoral than the free market because they reject property rights and reduce individual freedom.

How might the government play a role in sustainability? What are the strengths and weaknesses here?

Government has a role to play in sustainability, by determining the approach to solving environmental problems. Pigovian (quantity) approaches that employ taxation are inefficient. In like manner, regulatory approaches are often inefficient. Both of these approaches, which rely on a lot of governmental intervention, involve deadweight losses, which are inefficient. The Coasian (or bargaining) approaches are the most efficient way to solve many (but not all) of these problems. This approach uses the legal system to determine whose rights were violated to resolve the problem. This is not to say that there is no place for governmental regulation, but if we are realistic we will acknowledge it can cause more problems than benefits.

How do mediating institutions make a difference when thinking about and enacting “sustainability.” What might their role look like?

There are no mediating institutions, outside of the legal profession, that should be involved in the process.

What are some further developments of this topic that would be worth pursuing as Christian philosophers, ethicists, and theologians.

Currently, environmental ethics is dominated by those who hold to “deep ecology,” which is an enviro-centric approach. Most of these favor socialism and have a view of man as a disease. Christian ethicists, philosophers, and theologians need to get more informed and then more involved. Cal Beisner, the president of the Cornwall Alliance is a fine example of the right approach

to the subject. We need more people who are informed and committed to a Christian worldview to enter this debate.

Craig Mitchell is Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is also a Research Fellow for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. His areas of expertise include issues in metaethics, ethical and political philosophy and epistemology.