



# Definitions of Sustainability: The Good, the Beautiful and the True.

By Will Varey - emrgnc (Founder)

In Plato's Symposium<sup>1</sup>, the closing speech by Socrates is on the true nature of love, the pursuit of beauty and, with the discovery of different truths, the finding of true goodness. The good, the beautiful and the true have been the immutable questions of the philosophers of ages for all eternity.

When we look for a definition of sustainability we are faced with similar questions.

At first we struggle to understand what sustainability is, as a concept. While definitions of the concept abound – we understand sustainability is about the ability to sustain something. That thing essentially is a meaningful and happy existence, now and forever, for ourselves and for those for whom we care.

The concept itself is not new. It is fundamental to the endeavor of the human soul and the emergent complexity of our continuing existence. What is new is the different and expanding definitions of this concept that we now hold at the centre of our being.

An important first step in working with sustainability concepts is to separate the concept itself from its applied definitions. Understanding what we mean by goodness, beauty and truth assists us in this quest.

When we look for a definition we usually look to a dictionary. For values based concepts a good dictionary will usually be a virtuous guide, giving us direction on where to look, but not being so presumptuous as to be prescriptive about what we will find.

If we look to the Oxford dictionary definition of 'good' we are told that it means "*adj.* ~ having the right or desired qualities". We now know what goodness is, but become no clearer about knowing what those qualities are.

Similarly, if we look for a definition of beauty the dictionary tells us that this is “*n.* ~ a combination of shape, color, sound etc that pleases the senses” – and that something is beautiful, if it has beauty.

We may understand by its conceptual definition what beauty *is*, however, to know if something is ‘beautiful’ we need to understand more, and to relate this to a personal level. If we have no need to communicate the elements that determine beauty, we simply need to say ‘It is beautiful because I say it is’. No other definition of the concept is required as ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’. Where we need to agree on beauty, to look for and assess the qualities of a thing collectively, we will have much greater difficulty.

For example, if we wanted to choose a beautiful house, the one we consider beautiful may be very different to the monstrosity the real estate agent suggests to us. What is in fact beautiful to us as individuals is very important, and personal. Translating a personal definition of beauty, and being conscious enough of it to be able to articulate it clearly, becomes very important if we are seeking assistance in our quest for the beautiful.

So it is with sustainability. We may often find ourselves as leaders and managers of sustainability saying ‘It would be easy if they could just see what I see’ and may begin to argue about who holds the greater truth.

We may then look somewhere for a definition of ‘truth’, in an authoritative statement by another, possibly in the dictionary, to resolve the matter. In doing so we would find that truth is ‘*n.* ~ the quality or state of being true’, and something is true if it ‘is in accordance with fact or reality’. Whose reality shall we choose? Which interpretation of the facts are we to rely on to find the truth?

The understanding of the good, the beautiful and the true is something we manage and work with in society everyday. Recognizing that there are multiple truths and multiple realities is the crucial step in understanding that to find universal integralism, we must work with ethical relativism.

In the application of sustainability principles we will always need to understand the core concept, but also will require a workable definition, a personal definition, to determine what sustainability means in a practical sense.

Once we understand the concept of sustainability, and that it is different to its definition by others, we can then create a workable and personal definition of what that concept is understood to mean by us. Being conscious of that

personal definition enables us to consciously choose how we think about sustainability, and therefore to be in our actions 'sustainable' (at least in a way that is meaningful from our perspective).

To think about our thinking is a luxury, but in doing so, we become conscious of our consciousness. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Karl Popper made an excuse for the modern philosophical enquiry and an apology for all philosophy when he said:

*"While all around us in the world of nature perishes – philosophers continue to talk about whether the world exists. My excuse is this. We all have our philosophies, whether or not we are aware of this fact, and our philosophies are not worth very much. But the impact of our philosophies upon our actions and our lives is often devastating. This makes it necessary to try to improve our philosophies by criticism. This is the only apology for the continued existence of philosophy I am able to offer." (1972:32)<sup>2</sup>.*

The only modern excuse for philosophy is to know that we have one. The philosophy of sustainability is founded in the understanding that sustainability is a values based concept, a moral construct, that is for each of us individually and where we share values, collectively, to define and make real in a personally meaningful way.

By being conscious of our moral conscience, we are then able to communicate this to others and to ask them to respect and live by those principles in all that we do in common together. It is by this process that sustainability transforms from a concept understood in general terms, to one that is embraced in definition, form, substance and, finally, in meaningful and sincere action.

**By William Varey**

May 2004

### **Bio**

**William Varey** BJuris., LLB(Hons), MLM (Distn) has 'Sustainability Navigator' as one of his job descriptions. He is the founder of **emrgnc**, a forum for consciousness evolution. He is presently working on pre-doctoral research into the theories of growth of organisations and integrated models for sustainable organisational development, extending on his Masters research into the dynamics of generative learning in organisations. He is an Associate Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management (AFAIM) and a member of the Multi-National Alliance for the Advancement of Organisational Excellence (MAAOE) and the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP). He can be contacted at: [william@emrgnc.com.au](mailto:william@emrgnc.com.au)

1. Hamilton, W., (1959) **Plato -The Symposium (Translation)**, Penguin Books Limited, Middlesex, England

2. Popper, K.R. (1972) **Objective Knowledge: an evolutionary approach**, Oxford University Press, London