

**Moral Awakening and Reconceptualization of Societal Values as Mechanisms for
Achieving a Sustainability Society**

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Introduction

Our global community is at a critical point in human history. Our increased reliance on fossil fuels, overconsumption of material goods, and abuse of the natural environment are beginning to have dangerous repercussions. These issues are widespread and complex in nature, however it has become clear that their cause boils down to flawed human behaviour. Up to now, efforts to solve these societal problems have come short. Here, I will argue that the source of unsustainable behaviours is a of flawed human values. That in order to create a sustainable society we must undergo a moral awakening and reconceptualize our fundamental values. I will use Schwartz's Theory of Basic Values, Milbrath's Dominant Social Paradigm, Stern's Value Belief Norm Theory, and Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development to describe the relationship between values, beliefs, and morals and the actions they inspire. Then I will make recommendations for altering values and morals.

Values and Behaviour

The concept of values, how they are created, passed on, and how they affect our actions has long been a point of contention for philosophers, social psychologists, and political activists. So much of the political and social conflict in our world is rooted in the actions and beliefs of people around us. Therefore, it is understandable that we would try to find the underlying factor driving these actions and beliefs. Philosophers and psychologists have come to the conclusion that it is our values. Schwartz defines values as beliefs that refer to desirable goals that are generalizable across situations, and their assigned relative importance serve as standards or criteria for decision-making (Schwartz 2012). This is the definition of values that I will use in this paper.

Values Across Cultures

The Schwartz (2012) Theory of Basic Values contains ten innate human values. All people possess these values but different cultures and individuals vary in the relative importance they assign each value (Schwartz 2012). For instance, all humans have the values of *hedonism* and *universalism*. *Hedonism* the "pleasure of senuous gratification for oneself" conflicts with the value of *universalism*,

“understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and nature” (Schwartz 2012). In regard to sustainable decision making, this is the conflict between the hedonistic desire for production and consumption of material goods and wealth, that feels good, and the universalist desire to make sustainable decisions with which the needs of others is put above the desires of self. This interplay between values, and the varying relative importance that individuals assign to them, is the cause of most conflict in our world. Schwartz depicts this interplay in a visual model of the relations between his ten motivational types of value (Figure 1.).

The Current State of Affairs

A large part of our society operates with the *self-enhancement* values of *achievement* and *power* at the pinnacle of their value hierarchies. Whether this is a conscious decision or caused by a lack of value driven thought, it is plaguing our society and the root cause of the environmental crisis that we are facing. Capitalism is the manifestation of this drive for self-enhancement. The Expansionist view of our economy as a self-sustaining system capable of growth that is unhindered by the physical environment is driven by this self-enhancement ideal (Rees 2002). The mindless destruction of our ecosystem is fuelled by a lack of mindfulness in our actions and critical awareness of our values.

Milbrath’s Industrial Dominant Social Paradigm

Milbrath (1984) views the societal value conflict as a contrast between *aggression/competition* and *empathy/compassion*. The values of *aggression* and *competition* are synonymous to Schwartz’s (2011) concept of self-enhancement. Milbrath states that the relative importance that the global community places on *aggression* and *competition* have created an Industrial Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP). A DSP is the set of values or beliefs upon which a society operates. Milbrath’s industrial DSP is characterized by: (1) the belief that the accumulation of material wealth is the main mechanism for optimizing quality of life; (2) The belief that science and technology can be used to dominate nature in the goal of producing material wealth; (3) The social risks of the promotion of technology should be accepted by society given the material benefits they produce; (4) Public policy should have the goal of

generating good economic conditions; (5) The free market is the optimal way of maximizing material wealth, and should therefore be upheld; (6) Compassion and justice depress productivity and wealth. Finally, (8) societal decision-making should be oriented towards efficiency and decisiveness (Milbrath 1984). All of these characteristics of the Industrial DSP, of which Western Society is a part, are driven by societal values of individualism, greed, material wealth, and self-promotion. However, these characteristics are based on the false assumptions that material wealth brings quality to life, science and tech are capable of dominating nature, natural resources are bottomless, ceaseless economic and population growth is possible, and free markets are capable of maintaining the public good. Therefore, our societies that the selfish individual is the driving force behind competition, is flawed and inherently incapable of creating a sustainable society that can meet the needs of all of its citizens. This inherent selfishness and competition are often defended with Dawkin's theory of the selfish gene (Blewitt, 2008). This genetic predisposition for selfishness is understandable. However, as depicted in Schwartz's diagram of values, self-enhancement is one small chunk of our value system. It is recognising the relative importance of the other parts that will allow us to achieve a sustainable society.

Towards a Sustainable Society: Dominant Social Paradigm

The solution Milbrath (1984) offers, is a societal shift towards *empathy* and *compassion*. This belief maps onto the *self-transcendence* aspect of Schwartz's model, which includes the values of *universalism* and *benevolence*. This idea of *self-transcendence*, is the rising above one's own desires and wants. This is the centerpiece of sustainable decision making, putting the needs of others, nature, and the global community above our own. How does *self-transcendence* apply to sustainable decision making? It is the fundamental prioritization of others or the whole community above oneself. For instance, the understanding that choosing to not have children goes against one's personal desires, but fulfills the needs of the global community.

Towards a more sustainable society: Value Belief Norm Theory

Public support of the environmentalist movement is undoubtedly the most important aspect of developing real and sustainable change in our society's behaviour. In Stern, *et al.*'s (1999) Value Belief Norm Theory of Social Movements, they attribute the strength of a movement to the general public's acceptance of the movement's basic values and subsequent development of personal norms. These values are then combined with the belief and knowledge that valued objects are threatened, and the understanding that their actions can help. More specifically the presence of the values for *altruism, tradition, and openness to change*, serve as the basis for pro-environmental action, which can be seen in Stern *et al.*'s schematic model of the Value Belief Norm Theory (VBN) (Fig. 2). The steps in the cascade of the VBN theory awareness of consequences, and the ascription of responsibility are attainable through education and media (Stern *et al.* 1999). To me, the instilment of values, particularly *altruistic values* in our society, especially its youth, is the more difficult but most promising step in achieving environmental sustainability. It is a revolutionary change in the consciousness and psyche of the global community, one that moves away from selfish and competitive values to more altruistic and universalist principles.

Values as the Mechanism for Social Change

Time and time again, philosophers, psychologists, and environmentalists have pointed at instilling altruistic values as the first step in real sustainable change. Milbrath (1984) proposed his own value structure for achieving a sustainable society. The center piece of *instinctive valuation on one's life* is surrounded by the values of *justice, compassion, and high quality of life* (Milbrath 1984) (Fig. 3). Again, we see a call for a rise in the moral consciousness of our society. People that highly value *justice and compassion*, are more likely to make pro-environmental decisions that involve putting others, and the planet above themselves. A recent study proved this practical use of morals as a way of motivating change. Bolderdijk *et al.* (2013), compared the use of moral-environmental based reasoning for checking your tire pressure to economic reasons. They concluded that there was a significant increase in compliance when the moral reasoning was used (Bolderdijk *et al.* 2013). Clearly,

employing an individual's moral conscience when requesting something of them activates a different level of thinking. When morals and values are activated, they have the capacity to change our behaviour, particular behaviour with environmental importance.

I have now made the case for why values, particularly those involved with *justice, compassion, altruism, empathy, and universalism*, are key to the development of a sustainable society. We will now look towards how this can be achieved. How can we properly balance our societies values?

Values vs. Morals

For clarity's sake, I am going to define the differences between *values* and *morals*. Two words that are often used interchangeably and have a very small difference in meaning. Morals are rules that differentiate between right and wrong based on cultural and societal expectation. Values on the other hands are sets of rules set by an individual. Morals are rules such as "stealing is bad" which are perpetuated by societal beliefs and teachings. Values on the other hand, are upheld by the person, and as we discussed earlier, the attributed relative importance varies in each individual.

In my opinion, the development and strengthening of both morals and values is important in the development of a more sustainable society. I believe that it is almost a cascading effect, socially instilling *morals* which eventually are internalized by the individual in the form of *values*. These values are then part of an individual's identity and are more strongly adhered to. I will now move on to how this moral awakening can be achieved.

Moral and Value Development: Kohlberg's Theory

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development is one of the most well-respected and supported understandings of moral development. Kohlberg creates three levels of moral development, with six sub-sections. The first stage or, Pre-Conventional stage, which includes moral judgement based on avoiding punishment and self-interest. I would argue that a large part of our society would operate under this moral judgement. Why shouldn't I purchase a vehicle? What's in it for me? The middle stage is entitled Conventional. It includes interpersonal accord and conformity, which describes

adhering to social norms and the law and order morality. Legal or monetary motivations for sustainable behaviour are becoming more commonplace, but are they truly effective? The final stage of Kohlberg's theory is Post-Conventional which involves the social contract orientation and *universal* ethical principles (Kohlberg 1994). And now we return back to Schwartz's (2012) value of *universalism*. This higher-order thought process that involves the valuation of others and the global community above oneself. If true societal sustainability is to be achieved we need everyone to reach this final level of moral development. Kohlberg believed that progression through the stages was achieved through moral discussion, which he believed had a place in the formal education system. He also believed that a great deal of moral development comes from natural social interaction.

Kohlberg defined certain conditions optimal to the development of morals through moral discussion. First, exposure to the next higher stage in his progression of moral discussion and exposure to situations that pose problems or contradictions to an individual's current moral structure. Kohlberg claimed that it was interchange and discussion about these sorts of situations that were capable of igniting moral development (Kohlberg 1975).

Moral Development through Discussion and Social Interaction

Social interaction and moral discussion are two routes Kohlberg provided for developing a morally conscious society. When I reflect on my childhood I see a large deficit in the focus on moral development in my public education. Any formal discussion of moral dilemmas was most likely reserved to the single semester of Current Events, we were able to take in Grade 12. Creating curriculum that incorporate moral reasoning in primary education systems seems like a genuine possibility. Social interaction on the other hand seems like a more difficult front. The increased prevalence of technology, that has allowed for instantaneous and constant communication has created a weakening in the quality of the connections we are creating. As Susan Tardanico (2012) wrote for Forbes, "With all the powerful social technologies at our fingertips, we are more connected – and potentially more *disconnected*- than ever before". What impact has this had on the quality and depth of

our conversations. I believe that the frequency and quality of conversations that discuss, morals, beliefs, and values has been greatly diminished. The focus on maximizing social interaction through smartphones and social media have created a moral deficit in our generation. Next time you're with friends, families, or peers, put the phone down, forget about the next Instagram you're going to post and have a real discussion. Dig deep. Question each other's values.

Religion and Moral Development

Historically, religion has served as one of the primary agents of moral education. Religious education from varying belief systems usually includes some degree of moral education and discussion of values. Numerous religious groups use stories, principles, and tales to teach moral principles and instill values in their constituents (Hare 2014). I wholeheartedly believe that religions have the capacity to teach values, particularly those that promote pro-environmental behaviour. However, I do not believe religions to be the only mechanism of moral development.

Conclusion

A value-based or moral awakening is essential to the development of a sustainable society. Our current Dominant Social Paradigm is one that instills the values of *egocentrism*, *competition*, and *aggression* in our community. The outcome of this has been a society that is inherently unsustainable. Therefore, we must re-evaluate the relative importance we attribute to each of our principal categories values. Values such as *universalism*, *empathy*, and *altruism* need to be prioritized. To do this, it is crucial that we have an increase in the moral development and education of our global community. There are many mechanisms of achieving this, active moral education, an increase in interpersonal connection, or religious moral teachings. So, take a minute, or an hour, to think about what it is that you value, how that impacts your behaviours, and discuss this with the people around you.

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Appendix

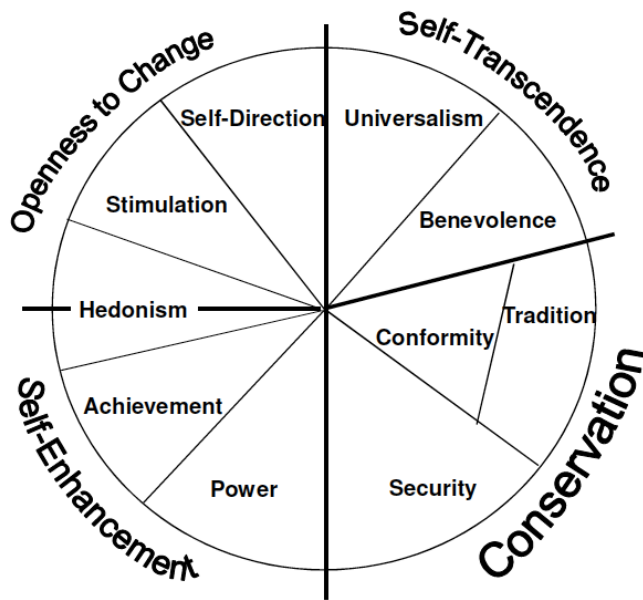


Figure 1. Visual Depiction of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values (Schwartz, 2011).

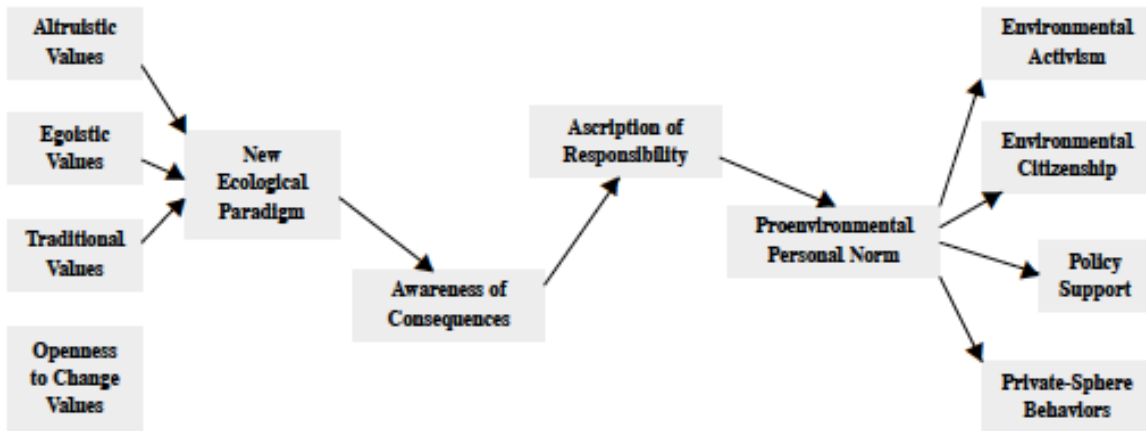


Figure 2. Schematic of Value Belief Norm Theory. Note the interplay of values, beliefs in regard to awareness of consequences and ascription of responsibility, and personal norms driving pro-environmental behaviour (Stern et al. 1999).

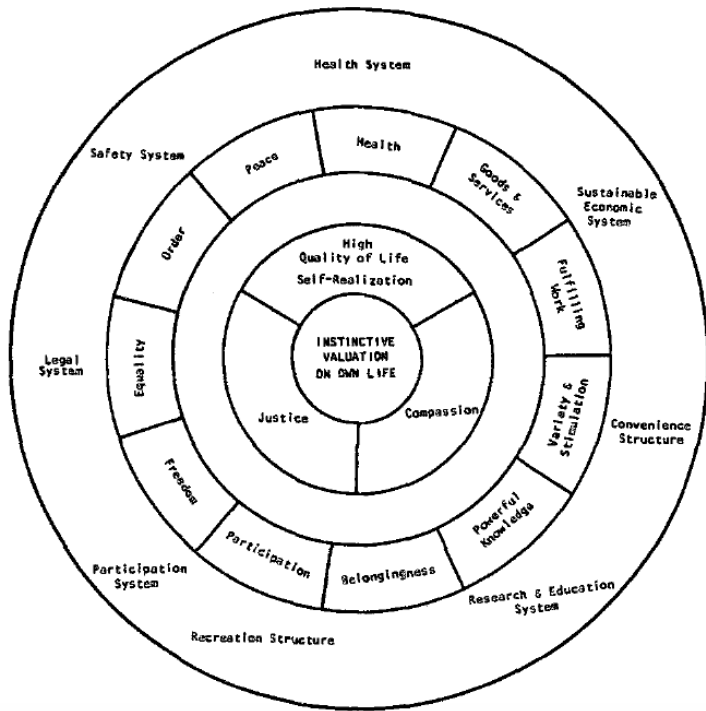


Fig. 3. Proposed value structure for a sustainable society, with the inner circle of *justice, compassion, and high quality of life and self-realization* (Milbrath 1984).