

Ethics and the Resilient Society: Examining the role of ethics in building societal resilience

Glenn Varona

Why is ethics in society essential to building societal resilience? This essay is being written while under COVID 19 lockdown. But beyond this recurring pandemic is the even larger creeping disaster of Climate Change. Given these circumstances, it is essential to reexamine the discourse around resilience and why ethics is a necessary, though often forgotten component of its development. The enforced isolation of this writer's situation has become a good opportunity for thinking and writing.

Resilience has largely been examined in the disciplines of Ecology and the environment; the social sciences and societal systems; and disaster management, engineering, and infrastructure. Ethicists have largely stayed away from or been ignored in this discourse. This does not mean that nothing has been written on the relationship between ethics and societal resilience. Indeed, Chandler (2013: 178-179) argues that a resilient society is truly possible only through an ethical sense of shared and relational responsibilities between and among society's members. Global problems, which currently include this viral pandemic, refugees, economic recession, and the Climate Crisis among others, should be interpreted as ethical lessons that people should reflect on to build self-awareness and eventually, social consciousness. In this, an ethical view of one another becomes critical to developing a resilient society.

Many would argue that there is no standard definition of resilience (Arbon, Gebbie, Cusack, Perera, and Verdonk 2012: 10). They may be right, but if it is not possible to define resilience in a standard way, it is possible to conceptualize it. A good starting point is to look at resilience as the capacity of a human system, of society, to absorb the impact of an adverse event and return to normal as soon as possible (McAslan 2010: 1-2). Beyond this is the capacity of such a system to redefine normal and emerge in a better state, especially if it becomes impossible to return to the old normal (Varona 2017: 24). In Ecology, it is the ability

of society and the environment around it to sustain human well-being through disturbance and change through buffering against shock, adaptation, and transformation (Biggs, Schuler, and Schoon 2015: 22). So, where does ethics fit in? More important, why is ethics so essential to the development, strengthening, and sustainment of societal resilience, which includes both human and environmental components taken together systemically? Furthermore, if humanity is to sustain its resilience as a society within the wider ecology of the world, these considerations should not only look into the present, but also the future. Indeed, it is the responsibility of those still living to ensure the survival of future generations, many yet unborn (McIntyre 2009: 11).

Thus, the question of ethics in resilience needs examination. A resilient system, whether it is an individual person, a community, or natural ecosystems, requires three essential components: Physical, Procedural, and Moral. Physical components involve material things that contribute to system resilience. In practical terms, this could be infrastructure, evacuation centers, emergency vehicles and facilities, hospitals, and all the other material things that society would need to face adverse events. Procedural components include formal and informal processes, procedures, rules, regulations, operational and strategic plans, systems, and even community connections that allow society to act appropriately and organise against adversity. They ensure that physical components and resources are used properly. Moral components include the hard to measure characteristics and qualities of humanity that are part of the human and societal spirit. These include beliefs, values, leadership, trust and social capital, and ethics (McAslan 2010: 4).

Ethics, the human capacity to act on what is right and just, has both individual and social dimensions. As an aspect of human life, it enables individual persons to understand his or her dependence and connection with fellow human beings. Thus, a decision to do what is ethical not only benefits others, but ultimately oneself (Preston 2007: 7-8). John Donne wisely advised not to ask for whom the bells toll. Ethics makes it possible for humanity to flourish (Gaita 1999: 19). Or, taking from one of the greatest of moral philosophers, seeking the good for the individual is quite desirable. However, seeking the good of the polity or the wider human community is “nobler and more divine” (Aristotle 2011: 3). This is where ethics and resilience are integrated. Societal resilience is not truly possible unless society is ethical. And to extend this proposition to its logical conclusion, an ethical society is more than simply a collection of people behaving ethically towards each other. Rather, in addition to this, they are also ethical towards the wider natural environment around them. Indeed, environmental ethics, part of the broader field of Bioethics, deals with the application of the moral law on life itself (O’Neill 2002: 5).

A Framework for Societal Ethics and Resilience

Having established why society could not be truly resilient unless it is also ethical, the question then becomes; what are the most important societal values that should be strengthened to build this ethical framework and lead to true societal resilience? The first is trust and the second, accountability.

Trust is the most important component of social ethics. Quoting from Confucius, the Irish philosopher Onora O'Neill (2002: 3) stated that all communities must have three things: good arms, enough food, and trust. However, if it is possible only to obtain one out of these three, then it should be trust, because it is always possible to make good on the other two in time, but not trust if it is missing. Trust builds social cohesion, without which society becomes far less resilient than it could be. Beyond this, trust allows members of a community to co-exist with fellow human beings and with the wider environment. The COVID 19 crisis presents a good example. It could be argued that government lockdowns and restrictions on personal freedom, which in some cases have exceeded even the most excessive definition of the word, draconian, are the result of a general lack of trust. It is politically expedient for government to use restrictive police powers more when levels of social and public trust are less than they should be. John Locke stated that government power is derived from the consent of the governed. It is not meant to take away a person's natural human liberty, and thus is exercised under some very clear limits (Locke 1980: 63-64). In contrast, the practice of governing in many countries today, especially in the midst of this pandemic, is to suppress liberty. This is arguably so because governments do not trust people to act ethically.

This mistrust goes the other way as well. The Extinction Rebellion against a larger, but arguably less well understood, climate crisis is the result of a societal mistrust or distrust of government, big business, and their decision makers. For lack of trust by government, people would not trust their governments to act ethically either. Ultimately, this mutual mistrust is in large part due to society's lack of trust within itself. Indeed, why do people lock their doors, or go beyond merely locking doors and install security technology? Why do governments increasingly rely on CCTV and other surveillance measures to keep people in line? The increased, more voluminous, and more rapid flow of information through civil society, social networks, and the Internet complicates this immensely (OECD 2013: 19). And yet, it is for these characteristics of modern society that levels of trust need to increase. The only way to develop an ethical society is to develop and maintain high levels of societal trust. Without it, people could not rely that others will be ethical. Without trust based societal ethics, the basic principle that governs people's attitudes towards others, societal resilience would be severely weakened. If societal resilience depends on people working together to overcome the impact

of adversity, without societal trust, people would find it exceedingly difficult to work together.

A practical result of trust is accountability. It is the ethical outcome of a relationship based on trust. Accountability is ethical responsibility for one's decisions and actions towards one's fellow human beings, the wider environment, and oneself. This may seem different to the more commonly understood concept of accountability as a means of limiting the exercise of power (Sartori 1991 in Lindberg 2009: 4). However, at its core, it is the ability to limit or constrain the power of institutions, such as government, over people through a strong sense of shared responsibility by all for all. If people in society could internalize accountability as shared responsibility, then arguably, there would be little need for governments to exercise restraining power. Society becomes its own source of regulation and self restraint. Indeed, accountability for a decision or action implies being responsible to someone (Layman 2014: 105), knowing enough to act with the best understanding of the interests of others. Why, then, would there be a need for an external institution to enforce this?

This does not argue for the abolition of government. In the liberal tradition, government serves the important purpose of ensuring that people can exercise their rights equitably without hindering other people's exercise of their own rights. However, accountability is a higher principle than the capacity of government to exercise its powers, since whatever rules are imposed to govern the actions of people must, in turn, become the same standard that governs the rule makers' authority to make these rules (Locke 1980: 8, 17, 63 and 71). Society and its members' accountability to each other and to themselves comes out of relationships of trust.

Conclusion

Trust and its practical result, accountability, make for a more ethical, and therefore, a more resilient society. The challenge is for society to begin a dialogue, a discourse that re-examines and reassesses people's relationships and responsibilities towards each other. The COVID 19 pandemic, Climate Change, and the world's current challenges might become the necessary pause for thought for global society. This pause and re-examination are not only essential, but perhaps critical for humanity's continued survival.

References

- Arbon, Paul, Gebbie, Kristine, Cusack, Lynette, Perera, Sugi, and Verdonk, Sara. 2012. "Developing a Model and Tool to Measure Community Disaster Resilience." Final Report. 1-28. Adelaide: Torrens Resilience Institute.

- Aristotle. 2011. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: A New Translation*. Translated by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Biggs, Reinette, Schluter, Maja, and Schoon, Michael L. 2015. "An introduction to the resilience approach and principles to sustain ecosystem services in social–ecological systems" in *Principles for Building Resilience: Sustaining Ecosystem Services in Social-Ecological Systems*, edited by Reinette Biggs, Maja Schluter, and Michael L. Schoon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Chandler, David. 2013. "Resilience Ethics: Responsibility and the Globally Embedded Subject." *Ethics and Global Politics* 6:3 175-194. <https://doi.org/10.3402/egp.v6i3.21695>.
- Gaita, Raimond. 1999, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love & Truth & Justice*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company.
- Layman, Daniel. 2014, "Accountability and Parenthood in Locke's Theological Ethics." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31:2 101-118.
- Lindberg, Staffan I. 2009, "Accountability: The Core Concept and its Subtypes." Working Paper No. 1, April 2009. *Africa Power and Politics Program*, UK Department for International Development. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Locke, John. 1980, *Second Treatise of Government*, translated by C. B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- McAslan, Alastair. 2010. "Organisational Resilience: Understanding its Concept and its Application." Concept Paper. 1-17. Adelaide: Torrens Resilience Institute.
- McIntyre, Janet. 2009. "Contributing to Peace through Participation to Support Unselfish 'Feed Forward' to the Next Generation of Life." *Action Learning and Action Research Journal* 15:1 10-47.
- OECD. 2013. *Government at a Glance*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- O'Neill, Onora. 2002. *A Question of Trust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Neill, Onora. 2002. *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Preston, Noel. 2007. *Understanding Ethics, Third Edition*. Melbourne: Federation Press.

Varona, Glenn. 2017. "Business Resilience and Dealing with Economic Crises: Developing a Model to Measure Business Resilience." *Journal of Business and Economics in Times of Crisis* 2:2 23-46.