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Business's Environmental Influence

In April 2016, leaders from 195 countries made history by standing together to sign the Paris Climate Agreement and promising to make measurable efforts to reign in carbon emissions that contribute to global warming (UNFCCC). This signing signified that leaders around the globe both recognized that climate change is a real event happening to our planet, and actively pledged to take steps toward building a more sustainable Earth. These measures are goals set to reduce greenhouse gas emissions starting in the year 2020 (Chan, Davenport, et al). A common theme within these measures is that businesses must change, scale up, or mend their practices with the hope that we will reduce carbon emissions enough to slow the effects of climate change.

Between the 1990's and about 2013, sustainability has grown from a corporate non-issue to a major factor that most corporations subscribe to, actively track, and launch efforts in the name of (DesJardins 217). Although there was a boom in the 1970's in American policymaking that focused heavily on environmental issues, there has never been as much focus as there is today on sustainable development (DesJardins 221-222).

Many companies – including the world's largest retailer Wal-Mart – are making commitments to reduce their carbon footprints, which then cause other companies – from their suppliers to their partners – to make similar commitments aligning with their

vision of sustainability. Wal-Mart's promises alone have the power and the influence to positively affect the business practices of 100,000 of its suppliers and countless periphery companies (DesJardins 217). And though government regulations may have some impact on these efforts coming to exist, the majority of the pressure companies feel to be sustainable and offer more environmentally friendly products or services comes from their customers. Furthermore, business can and does influence lawmaking, and therefore it is not unreasonable to expect that if more businesses align with environmentally friendly principles and practices, government policy may not be far behind (DesJardins 222).

Many small businesses are making similar commitments as well. They may not be able to make as much of an economic impact as an enormous retailer like Wal-Mart, but the consumer shift toward slow fashion and supporting local business goes to show that the little guys are quite possibly the most important players in the sustainability game since they can make the most impact on a local level. A small business that invests in making itself sustainable is not only more environmentally friendly, but it translates to efficiency, access to better resources and employees, and the potential for a better profit margin than a business with unsustainable goals (Moore).

The strategic model of Social entrepreneurship holds that profit and doing good are not mutually exclusive for any sized company – stakeholders in a smaller company will be able to see the results of their efforts more obviously and immediately than a large corporation (DesJardins 71-73). “Sustainability offers a model of corporate social responsibility that suggests that ethical goals should be at the heart of every corporate mission,” DesJardins explains, and then goes on to elaborate that from the perspective

of the strategic model, "the success of a business must be judged not only against the financial bottom line of profitability, but also against the ecological and social bottom lines of sustainability." (DesJardins 72-73)

The agreement among the world's leaders to take active measures to fight global warming is very Utilitarian - doing what will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. By banding together to make a concerted effort to reduce greenhouse gases and hopefully slow the effects of climate change, the citizens of the world are not only working to create a better environment for themselves, but for generations to come. If we must make sacrifices and incite change in order to make this happen – if we must assume the responsibility of the means – then it is at least a realistic vision to have the ends we are aiming for. Just as the philosophical minds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were creating the roots of utilitarianism amidst an industrial revolution, we can shape our own utilitarian construct around sustainability efforts (DesJardins 29).

DesJardins states that "[i]n general, the utilitarian position is that happiness is the ultimate good" (30). I would argue that there is nothing one can consider more good than making life not only possible in the future, but functional and even prosperous. As we adapt to changes in technology and continue to strive to meet the needs of people around the globe, there will be markedly larger sacrifice made by some in order to meet the ends we envision – but it is not unfair to ask this as long as the end result is a net positive for the majority.

In June 2017, in an act of American Egoism, the current administration announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement,

despite there being no punishment for failing to meet the goals established by the previous administration (Domonosky Dwyer; DesJardins 31). The reasoning behind this claimed that the agreement was, among other things, economically not in the interest of the United States, and that a plan forged within the United States would be better for the American people. Despite urging from world leaders, businessmen, scientists, and citizens to not rescind on the agreement, the beginning steps were taken. (Domonosky Dwyer). This begs an interesting question on the viewpoint of utilitarianism – should we see the greater good on a more local level within our country, or on a global level? I believe to not think on a global level is a grave mistake.

John Stuart Mill posited that not all opinions are equal – there are certain individuals that have an amount of competency, knowledge, and qualifications whose opinions should be held in higher esteem than others (DesJardins 31). Just because someone with power holds an opinion does not make it right – ignoring the pleas from learned scientists and other world leaders to take climate change seriously and instead glad-handing businesses that subsist mainly on fossil fuels is an incredibly transparent and irresponsible action that will cause enormous negative impacts on not just our country, but the entire world – and all for the sake of the wallets of billionaires and lobbyists.

When considering the challenges of utilitarianism as it pertains to businesses shifting towards sustainability, we cannot ignore that there will be flaws. Updating systems in buildings takes a great amount of money and manpower – which is not something all companies can easily afford. When we create new technology, we must assume that it will take several versions before we get something functional and

accessible, which takes time and more money. This can be considered wasteful and a great burden. However, one should argue that there can be no growth without growing pains – the efforts we take now to update our policy and infrastructure may be taxing, but in years to come the result will be well worthwhile. If we do not make these efforts, the costs to future generations will be cripplingly immense in more than one sense (Dyke).

If our administration truly had the best interest of the American people in mind, they would get back on board with the other countries who have signed the Paris Climate Agreement. Countries and companies should be more accountable and expected cultivate a culture of sustainability. When most companies are already making efforts in this direction, the government would not need to even do much policing other than establishing goals, as we are already seeing the sustainability game become an incredibly competitive market. When there is a race to the top of businesses and countries attempting to one-up each other to be more green, there can be no losers.

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