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Only the Most Powerful Can Change the Mind

An undergraduate degree is currently viewed by many as simply a stepping-stone towards further education. Some find it difficult to discover value in an undergraduate degree because it may not immediately lead to employment opportunities. Upon reflection, I think that it is important to not overlook or undervalue what transpires over the course of those four years.   If you spend four years working towards anything, there are likely positive outcomes, and I believe that an undergraduate degree has allowed me to develop my ability to think critically, to work diligently and to be able to learn in a variety of environments. The capability to process and internalize material from a textbook and the ability to gain insight and apply concepts in the field or the lab are very important. However, learning from others and independent learning have likely been the most valuable assets obtained from my undergraduate degree as it has resulted in several important learning outcomes. The most valuable learning results in personal change, but the most important lessons that I have learned from this course are not necessarily physical behavioural change, but changes to my thinking and outlook on certain issues. Through thoughtful discussion and self-learning opportunities in this course, my views on ethics, democracy and *true* sustainability have been changed, and these have been the most valuable lessons.

A New Spin on Ethics and Human Characteristics

There are many human characteristics that have allowed us to become a very dominant species. Our incredible intelligence, drive for progress and leisure and our ability to show compassion are just a few characteristics that we associate as being human. This was not an original concept, however I developed a new understanding of the inevitable consequences of these characteristics. The ability to show compassion and have a moral and ethical guideline, is something that I used to appreciate as being one of the most interesting and important human traits, but I now realize how being ethical in the

conventional sense can be a liability to humanity as a whole. For instance, we have a well-documented overpopulation issue, and as was discussed in class, this has led to a plethora of other issues. An effective solution to this problem could be altering our medical practices or preventing research in the medical field in order to avoid the continued increase in population size and life expectancy. However, it seems as though this potentially effective solution is unlikely because of the set of moral and ethical guidelines that are engraved in culture. I have learned that although ethics are important, in some cases they can be contradicting. While it would seem ethical to give a dying patient medicine, this could contribute to overpopulation and the resulting issues. My personal opinion on ethics has been changed as a result of the discussion in this course. I now believe that what we deem to be ethical largely has to do with our perspective, and I think that in some cases it would be beneficial for human civilization if we changed the present perspective in which we analyze ethical situations. If viewing the medicine situation outlined above, in a more *long-term* and *humanistic* rather than an *individualistic* perspective, the problem to give or withhold medicine from the dying patient may yield a drastically different result. This would be because of a shifted ethical focus from the patient towards what is ethically correct for all of future humanity, and in this case providing medicine may not be the chosen ethical course of action. I have learned that in order to overcome ethical constraints to many global change issues, a *long-term* and *humanistic* perspective is important and may be necessary.

Value and Threats of Democracy

I have always thought and been told that we are very lucky to be living in Canada and a democratic country. The power of democracy is that everyone's opinion is to be represented and decision makers are accountable to the public. The ability to vote for individuals who write and pass legislature is a powerful position that is often overlooked. I have become aware of the ability of legislature to initiate change from a top-down mechanism, and how this is thought to be the fastest approach to achieve

mass change. In a democratic nation, every citizen having a vote to decide on those who draft this potentially rapid behaviour-changing legislature gives democracy incredible value and opportunity. I have never thought to question democracy until learning about its restrictions. When government is accountable to the nation's citizens this is both of value, but also presents a large threat. Policy makers are responsible for the entire public and therefore cannot pass legislature that would not be accepted. In order for there to be positive change that would reduce the damage that is being done to the environment, the policies that would have to be implemented would likely not be accepted by the general public because of disruptions to a comfortable lifestyle or the resulting expenses that would be incurred to maintain that lifestyle. For instance, policies that would eliminate jobs in fisheries in order to preserve the wild fish population would not be supported. This is one of the largest threats created by democracy, because there is a medium for rapid behaviour change in the form of legislature, but the accountability associated with democracy limits the progress of this legislature. I have become aware of this threat that is presented by democracy and I believe that in order to gain public support, politicians must work hard to discover and show how the benefits to individuals and communities of 'green' legislature can outweigh its negative aspects. This strategy is similar to the way we found a benefit for CoGro in issuing an advertisement for travel mugs, while simultaneously pursuing a sustainability initiative.

A New View on Sustainability

Sustainability is a concept that is starting to gain traction and awareness, especially in more developed countries. There are new technologies that are constantly being developed which are slowly making our lifestyles more environmentally friendly. Renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, and eco-labels are examples of the moving trend towards sustainable practices. This technological development and progress towards sustainability in culture is important and shows how we are

adapting to the anthropocentric problems that have been created. I have recently become aware, however, that these changes don't really lead to *true* sustainability. 'Green' technological advances are important, but people may hold our ability to discover and advance too highly. These technological advances are not completely solving anthropocentric problems and are only delaying the problem to a future point in time. The capacity to delay these problems discredits their severity, as the public is under the assumption that problems are being solved and we are becoming *truly* sustainable. Although my outlook on these 'sustainable' and 'green' technologies remains positive, I assess their importance with caution, because *true* sustainability is something entirely different. To live sustainably we are not in need of technological advancement but we are in need of a lifestyle change. We should not rely on technology to allow us to maintain our current lifestyle. I understand that it is unlikely for the entire human population to adopt this approach, and don't plan on quickly changing my lifestyle. I have however, developed an appreciation for the severity of the anthropocentric problems that will continue to face humanity, and now recognize that being able to *truly* live sustainably by generating your own power and food, and designing a home that requires as little additional energy input will soon become of great importance. The ability to live sustainably and use the immediate surrounding land to the fullest of its potential is living *truly* sustainably and is something that I will likely adopt out of future necessity.

A changed outlook and perspective on ethics, democracy and sustainability is how I have achieved the most valuable form of learning from participating in this course. The most valuable learning results in personal change, but this change need not be directly behavioural. The mind is a powerful tool, and only the most valuable learning will change its thought. These valuable lessons are a result of independent learning and thoughtful discussion and it is the climax of my entire undergraduate learning experience.