

Human Nature and Sustainability; a virtue ethical perspective

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Abstract

From now on the earth will be dominated by human nature rather than by nature. The process brought about many ecological (climate change), social (hyper globalization; migration, integration, pandemics) and financial-economic problems at the same time. The question is how to survive this 'perfect storm'. How can societies become more resilient and sustainable. The answer has to be found in the questionable state of the now dominating human nature, in particular the loss of a coherent and convincing moral framework.

The main objective of this paper is to suggest a new sustainability ethical framework based on a background theory of human nature. The framework is based on theoretical philosophical and psychological arguments and is empirically confirmed by meta-history, the great works of culture and a nowadays social survey. It gives a description of the more objective, biologically given human condition and at the same time captures the (cultural) differences in value orientations which occur in time and space, thus capturing the 'Zeitgeist' of human nature. Herewith the scheme accounts for both ethical naturalism and ethical relativism. It also resolves the 'objectivity' problem, the question whether or not a 'telos' or final end to human action has to be assumed on beforehand. By extending the ethical framework from the human condition to the 'economic condition' of the outside world, the scheme can give legitimized options for concrete policy measures.

Introduction

How to navigate out of the nowadays perfect storm in which many ecological, social and economic problems accumulate and have to be handled at the same time. Climate change, as foreseen at least half a century ago is unmistakably becoming reality. Its global impact combines with the effects of globalization, generating refugee and economic migration on an unprecedented scale. It worsens the already existing problems with the integration of earlier migrants and fuels religious conflicts. At the same time the wealth discrepancy between the rich and the poor is strengthening, which to some extent is related to the increasing domination of the private sector. In the financial system the underlying liberalization brings about inherent and thus predictable instability, which earlier resulted in the 2008 crises with the economic impact of a world war (Wolf, 2015). The financial sector is losing its stability again in the light of the negative interest rates and, as a further consequence of globalization, the recent crisis generated by the Corona-pandemic. Notwithstanding the enormous impact of a single virus, the general view is that we have entered the Anthropocene, in which the face and the fate of the earth from now on is determined by mankind and thus by 'human nature' rather than by 'nature'. As a consequence, we have to accept full responsibility for the deliberate navigation out of the current perfect storm.

As always, the current problems to a very large extent are the negative results of an earlier worldview. During the Enlightenment (1650-1800) the one sided value orientation was primarily focussed on human

rationality. With dominating universal and materialist values, it brought about a mechanistic worldview with room for science, technology and unlimited economical growth. The corresponding ethical framework was in first instance given by Kant (4:421), who tried to find objective and rational ethical rules of behaviour by testing to what extent individual subjective principles can be generalized (universalized) to all rational beings and in doing so become a universal law. This ‘categorical imperative’ prescribes ‘to act only in accordance to that principle (maxim) of behaviour through which one at the same time can will that it becomes a universal law’; what if anybody would behave that way. Many authors dismissed the test as a satisfactory universal algorithm for all moral deliberation (Korsgaard 2013). In particular MacIntyre (1967 p190) concluded that ‘with sufficient ingenuity almost every precept (maxim) can be consistently universalized’, so the test does not say much about morality. A second approach was ‘consequentialism’ which holds an action to be right if it promotes the best consequences; those in which happiness is maximized. In the specific sub-domain of ‘utilitarianism’ the operational criterion for moral judgement of ‘progress’ is in the greatest good or ‘utility’ for the greatest number. This approach has become very popular over the last 50 years though the application of economic cost-benefit analysis in which all societal and environmental values were expressed in monetary terms. But this monetization is highly problematic, in particular for future non-human values and interests (O’Neil, 1993). The main problem is that the ‘good’ is declared synonymous with the ‘cheapest’ or the ‘most profitable’. However in sustainability issues, the good coincides with the far more wider notion of ‘sustainability’.

These ‘rational’ approaches have contributed to the perfect storm we are facing today. The best course to navigate, is to prepare for a more resilient, stable and thus sustainable system. Rather than in technological Enlightenment euphoria, the answer to the problem has to be found in a renewed ethical framework which captures the manifold aspects and pluriform nature of sustainability.

Sustainability ethics

In search for such a renewed ethical framework, the first observation is that virtue ethics would be more suited for moral guidance in sustainability issues than the one sided rational approaches of Kant’s rule based ‘deontology’ and of utilitarianism. Virtue ethics, in contrast, approaches the morality of human conduct by emphasising the manifold virtues needed for the development of moral character in general. In Aristotelian virtue ethics, virtues are dispositions or character traits which are needed by human beings to reach ‘eudaimonia’, a state of ‘happiness’ or better: ‘human flourishing’. It is the human ‘final end’, the so called ‘telos’. Virtuous persons are expected to respond such to the diverging issues and circumstances that this telos can be reached and human flourishing becomes possible.

Jordan and Kristjansson (2017) highlight the following advantages of this Aristotelian virtue ethics to sustainability issues:

- Considering that the concept of ‘sustainability as a way of life’ is related to this human flourishing, the authors argue that virtue ethics is better placed to deal with sustainability issues than a set of restrictive and prohibitive regulations. As a further benefit of virtue ethics the authors point to the strong similarities between values and the different components of virtues. Just as virtues, values can act as guiding principles.
- Virtue ethics has the capability to handle ethical problems which are complex and pluriform in nature; apart from ecological issues, also principles like equality, freedom, justice, compassion, and non-violence are taken into account. Rather than asking the question ‘what is right’ in deontology and what would maximize well-being in utilitarianism, in virtue ethics the deeper, more fundamental and interrelated questions of human existence on earth are a central concern.
- In contrast with the earlier, one sided rational approaches, virtue ethics is more concerned with ‘feelings’ and as such takes more aspects of human nature into account.
- Virtue ethics interprets human flourishing as situated within society and thus comes closer to sustainability as a societal condition.

These advantage of virtue ethics in dealing with more complex and interrelated ethical problems, naturally brings about the frequent perception that virtue ethics fails to give sufficiently concrete guidance to how one ought to behave. But, as Shafer-Landau argues in his introduction to *Ethical Theory* (2013), its single issue oriented competitors deontology and utilitarianism fare no better in providing moral rules that can set out what can be done in particular situations. However as pointed out by Nussbaum (1999), the difference in performance between the different approaches might be less outspoken than it seems; also the Kantian and Utilitarian approaches contain treatments of virtue. Apparently the schemes rather have to be seen as complementary than contradicting. As a consequence the search for a renewed framework should be such that, as an additional requirement, also Kantianism and Utilitarianism notions can be accommodated.

Renewed virtue ethics

Having taken these complementary approaches on board, the renewed framework apparently has to be a virtue ethical one. But also within ‘virtue ethics’ rather fundamental discrepant strands coexist. By accommodating these discrepancies, the robustness of the framework to be composed will be improved. They will be described here briefly. Later, in retrospect, it will be discussed to what extent these various views on virtue ethics indeed are accommodated in the renewed framework.

Ethical relativism

The renewed orientation on virtue ethics over the past decades is connected with a turn to ‘ethical relativism’, the view that the only appropriate criteria of ethical goodness are local ones, internal to the traditions and practices of local societies and groups (Nussbaum 2013). Representatives of this relativism are MacIntyre (1981), Williams (1985) and Foot (1978). Nussbaum rejects such ‘ethical relativism’. She takes the position “that Aristotle indeed had an interesting way of connecting the virtues with a search for ethical objectivity and with (simultaneous) criticism of local norms”. Her first argument is that although there might be many different experiences in different contexts, nevertheless in our common humanity certain universal features can be identified, such as respect to the human body, distribution of resources, personal property, one’s own worth (‘greatness of soul’), living together (friendship) and intellectual capabilities. So the ground to which the virtues are applied at least is partially objective. Subjective perceptions and interpretations indeed play a role, but these interpretations are a function of its history and its concepts, as well of its innate structure’(p639). For example in the historical development from the Greek to the Christian period the Aristotelian approach provided a platform for culture-dependent debate on the valuation of the soul versus the body across enormous differences in both place and time. Apparently the virtue ethical framework can capture both the objective and the culture dependent, relativist issues and aspects. ‘It involves a delicate balancing between general, universal rules and the awareness of context dependent particulars in a process which, at the end of the day can be seen as objective’. Nussbaum thus speaks about ‘non-relative virtue ethics’; she finally believes that ‘the Aristotelian account can answer the questions of the relativist without relativism’(2013 p639).

Ethical naturalism

Virtue ethics usually is taken to be a form of ethical naturalism (Hursthouse, 1999 p192). Herein ‘ethical evaluations of human beings as good or bad are taken to be analogous to evaluations of other living things as good or bad specimens of their kind’ (p20). In this ethical naturalism flourishing is a flourishing of the species as a whole and of man as a social animal. Hursthouse (p202) translates this in the question whether its parts, actions, desires and emotions serve well: (1) its individual survival, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of its social group— in the ways characteristic of the species. In this approach of ethical naturalism these four ends of human flourishing are thus essential elements of the pattern of human nature. This unchanging human essence is the human ‘telos’, the final end which is assumed to emerge

objectively from this pattern. As the virtues are dispositions to act into the direction of the telos, the virtues can be discriminated from the vices as soon as a telos is defined (objectively or not).

In some way ethics thus is based on such considerations of ‘human nature’, in what is involved in being good qua ‘human being’. Ethical naturalism hopes that an objective account of human nature will indicate which of the human character traits can be considered to be virtues and which are to be seen as vices. But it remains unclear what an objective account of human nature is supposed to be. ‘Being good qua human being’ would imply that the virtues are character traits which can be derived from an objectively well-founded theory of human nature and are inherent to (every) human being. But as long as human choice and free will does not seem to be part of the human being as the above mentioned ‘social animal’, it is unlikely that such an account could provide meaningful moral judgements.

Hursthouse (1999, p193) summarizes the resulting dilemma as: ‘for either we speak from the neutral point of view, using a scientific account of human nature - in which case we won’t get very far- or we speak from within an acquired ethical outlook –in which case we will not validate our ethical beliefs, but merely re-express them’. For Hursthouse also the question whether ethics, in particular virtue ethics can be objective remains rather undecided; ‘the fundamental issue of ‘objectivity’ in ethics is rooted in disagreement about facts, or differences in values about which nothing can be said’(p241). She expects that more can be said ‘when we discover the extent to which we can give a coherent account of the roles the character traits play in our lives, an account that coheres with all the empirical and other facts that we bring into play (1999, p240). To this end neo-Aristotelians like Hursthouse and Foot and also Becker in developing a neo-Stoic theory, explore a form of naturalism that locates humans in a biological universe in a scientific sound way. Herein the human telos is derived from all scientific theoretical and empirical facts which are taken on board, among other things from biology, ethology, and psychology.

Objectivity; the denial of a telos

Nevertheless, Williams (1985) strongly contradicts these naturalist views that there is an unchanging human essence, the telos, which dictates what, as a matter of science, human beings are meant to do and be (even if there would be consensus about the facts). In his later work (1995) he refers to first and hardest lessons of Darwinism that there is simply no ‘telos’ in nature. Human beings have not evolved in particular (telos-driven) ways, but simply by natural selection. He sees naturalistic ethics as being born of an a priori teleological outlook. But virtue ethics cannot be based on any notion of a human telos. Looking for scientific vindication, as the naturalists do, is looking in the wrong direction. According to Chappell (2013) it would be better to draw answers to questions of human happiness (eudaimonia) from novels, poems and other works of art. He further states that the notion of the human telos that we need for ethics is not a notion drawn from science, but from what Wittgenstein calls “the shared customary behaviour of mankind” (Philosophical Investigations 1, 206), which points into the direction of history as a source for the deduction of the human telos.

The objectivity question thus remains rather unresolved. As a consequence, the ethical framework we are looking for, has to be transparent and meaningful both from the point of view of the naturalists and the non-naturalists who are denying the notion of an objective human telos.

The needs of future generations

In the original Brundtland definition of sustainability (1987) the present generations are expected to meet their current needs, without compromising the needs of future generations. Since then, policy makers have chosen time and again the easy way out, in stating that we cannot know the needs of future generations and that too much restrictions on the current consumption patterns thus would not make much sense. Moreover, they claim that technological developments would come to the rescue of future consumers and a depleted resource base. To overcome the intergenerational conflict, the ethical framework thus is expected to be time independent and has to account for both present and future value orientations and needs.

Emotions, feeling and feminist views

Nussbaum (1999) remarks that in retrospect it is hardly surprising that among the major defenders of virtue ethics a substantial number have been women. Up till now mainstream philosophy has been dominated by male-masculine orientations, which to a large extent explains the emphasis on rationality. A future, sustainability directed moral framework has to represent 'human nature' in a more balanced way, which implies that emotions and feelings, and herewith, feminine orientations are expected to play a larger role.

The renewed ethical framework

The ethical framework under construction has to take all the notions and requirements mentioned above into account. It has to accommodate the views of relativists and naturalists. It also has to be as objective as possible and to this end all relevant theoretical and empirical 'facts' have to be taken on board; philosophical and psychological insights, the empirical experiences of history as well as the notions expressed by art and culture over the centuries. It further has to be relevant on a societal level and finally should allow concrete discrimination of virtues and vices concerning sustainability issues.

In order to arrive at such a coherent account, Aristotle's virtue ethical scheme calls for an additional scientific background theory of human nature including a psychological understanding (Swanton 2003). In search for a such background theory, the above discussion about ethical relativism and naturalism suggest that a 'well-founded theory on human nature' has a double content.

On the one hand there is the objective, facts-based component which is derived from the functioning as a social animal; on the other the subjective, value-oriented component which reflects human choice and free will. Such a distinction would contribute to transparency of the pursued moral scheme, among others by allowing more explicit definitions of human nature, human flourishing, human dignity, virtues and vices. To this end, the required 'background theory of human nature', as Swanton calls it (2003 p9) is split into two components:

- The *human condition*, which describes (as objectively as possible) the essential human qualities or capabilities (as a social animal). It is fact based and describes the 'items in the to which a person has to respond in a moral sense. In the view of Swanton (p1) this is about people, objects, situations, inner states and (even) actions. It is supposed to answer the fundamental philosophical question; who do we think we are (ontology) and how do we know that (epistemology).
- *Human nature* (in a restricted sense) is the valuation of the elements (items) of the human condition on the bases of human choice and free will. Although this naturally implies highly subjective and cultural dependent value orientations, these orientations are a function of its history and its concepts, as well of its innate structure' as suggested above by Nussbaum. It also is in line with Hursthouse' statement that all the empirical and other facts on the character traits can be brought into play. In doing so, indeed a rather objective, theoretical structure can formulated in which both the subjective and cultural dependent value orientations can be captured.

The divide between *human condition* and *human nature* to some extent corresponds to the 'capability-concept' of Sen and Nussbaum (1993). They consider relationships with objects as being 'capabilities' to deal with features as physical life, health, physical integrity, senses, imagination, thinking emotions, reflections, other species and games, as well as political and material control over one's own environment. These capabilities correspond with the elements of the 'human condition', be it that the human condition which will be proposed below is not a list but a continuous field defined by two axes (dimensions). From the list of capabilities, elements can be chosen or valued by a specific culture or individual. The chosen subset then consists of the 'functionings' as a subset of chosen capabilities. These subset of functionings is still part of the human condition, but selection is made according to the value orientation as given by human nature.

The Human Condition

The 'human condition' contains all things and qualities to which the human being has to respond, both in the inside, individual and the outside, collective domain. In agreement with the earlier suggestions given by Swanton (2003) the items consist of physical, cultural and mental qualities, like the (own) physical body, intellectual insights, artistic expression and on the other hand, other people, nature, cultural objects etc. Apart from these items themselves, also (and to a certain extent) their relationships, their 'bonds' are relevant. To a large extent these bonds also have a physical, natural background and thus can be considered to be part of the human condition as well; for example the bond between child and mother. The attempt to find an encompassing pattern of the human condition as a background theory in virtue ethics is naturally started from the philosophies of Aristotle. Given Whitehead's observation (1929) that 'the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato' the 'background theory' of the human condition was derived from Plato's philosophy as well.

Plato and Aristotle

Plato understood the human condition as being part of a cosmic order and harmony, which has to be mirrored in societal order. This order often is expressed in mathematical or geometrical structures and, in Plato's philosophy, represented by the Forms (eide). These Forms or Ideas can be seen as idealized functional properties of all sorts of 'particulars', such as a chair or a horse and represent the most fundamental aspects of reality (Moravcsik 1992 p276). For example a Form might be the perfect model of a group of individuals. It reflects the whole – part relation between them. They are non-changeable essentials and represent a domain of eternal truth and values. Forms are not linguistic inventions but have a substantial being, independent from the human mind or psyche. They cannot be immediately known by the senses, but only through reason. Better understanding of the Forms and the harmony between them, enhances the process of mirroring cosmic order into social order and thus enhances virtue. So the source of the virtues is the understanding of these forms as fundamental elements of reality and mirroring the order and harmony in oneself (Moravcsik 1992 p300). The criterion for what to consider as 'good', thus is to be found in the knowledge of the Forms. Being 'objectively good' implies interest in creating harmony and can be seen as the 'meaning of life'. Forms thus can be seen as idealized generalizations of individual particulars. They relate to 'universals' which are just characteristics which are shared by many particulars. In contrast to Forms, universals are time bound and subject to change and thus form another realm.

However, Aristotle criticizes Plato's conclusion that 'the good' is strictly related to the Forms and thus necessarily would have a universal form. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2010; book I-6) Aristotle states that 'since the good has as many senses as being (e.g. substance, reason, quality, virtue) clearly it cannot be something universally present in all cases and single; for then it could not have been predicated in all categories, but in one only'. 'The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one Idea'. According to Aristotle, the good could be found as well in the particulars as in the universals. He apparently is more sensitive to the particular, circumstantial character of practical issues, thus making room for more diversity and contextual dependence. In terms of the search after the 'human condition' this means that the universals and the particulars are to be seen as equally important. They describe the balanced 'horizontal' contrast between the One and the Many, between the universal and the particular, uniformity and diversity and between the collective and the individual.

Apart from this 'horizontal' contrast between the universal and the particular, a second key element in Plato's philosophy is the 'vertical' divide between spirit (psyche) and matter. Although there are deviating interpretations of Plato with respect to this divide (Hare, 1982), Plato strongly suggests the divide in his *Phaedo*, where he let Socrates tell about the pre-existence of the soul versus the mortality of the body. Soul and body, spirit and matter are seen as essentially different entities. Moreover the realm of the psyche

is not the realm of the (eternal) Forms. The psyche can become aware of the Forms, but the Forms exist as ‘things’ independent of the psyche (Hare, 1982).

Summarizing, the combined works of Plato and Aristotle suggest a ‘human condition’ in which two divides or contrasts are distinguished which already were interpreted as horizontal and vertical:

- The ‘horizontal’ contrast was between the One and the Many, the universals and the particulars, which also is interpreted as the contrast between uniformity and diversity and between collective versus individual.
- The ‘vertical’ contrast is about mind (or psyche) versus matter, which is also understood as the metaphysical versus the physical and non-materialist versus the materialist.

The resulting pattern of the human condition is presented in Figure 1. For reasons to be discussed later, the basic pattern is projected against the background of Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man. The orientations on the horizontal axis can be differentiated into ontological (being) and epistemological (knowledge acquisition) characteristics:

<i>Ontological</i>	Universal One Collective Uniformity	Particular Many Individual Diversity
<i>Epistemological</i>	Universal (Objective Realist Theoretical	Singular (Subjective) Relativist Empirical

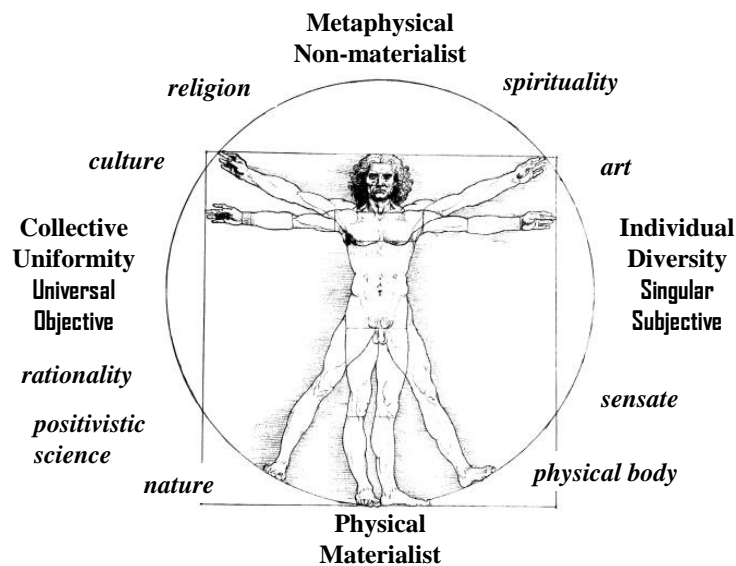


Figure 1: Human condition; typical human qualities and ‘capabilities’ (2nd level in Figure 2)

The ‘items in the field’ (pattern) of the human condition (as defined by Swanton 2003) are within (bodily wellbeing) or outside the agent, be it physical (other human beings, property, money etc) or abstract (knowledge, beauty, etc). Their mutual positions represent the ‘bonds’ between the items, for example the bond between the individual (right) and his body (below), or between individuals and ‘the others’ (left).

The upper right quadrant represents the spiritual ‘mindset’ in terms of insights, feelings, artistic expressions, contemplative attitudes of individuals; the lower right quadrant contains our own body and the physical (hedonistic) sensations. The left-hand side is a generalization of the particular elements on the right-hand side; art is generalized to culture, spirituality to structural / institutional religion and the physical, biological body to nature. Knowledge is obtained from the five subjective senses at the lower right-hand side, from intuition as ‘the sixth sense’ at the upper right-hand side and from objective reason (and rationality) at the left hand side.

The resulting pattern of the human condition, is the always preliminary and approximate answer to the question ‘who do we think we are’. The second question, ‘how do we know that’, is already partially answered; the pattern as given in Figure 1 is derived from the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. As will be discussed later, the ‘theory’ is further empirically confirmed by meta-history, by the great cultural works of literature and music, as well as by a nowadays social survey on value orientations.

Human Nature

Human nature now can be defined as the valuation of the human condition. It is a separate and specific value pattern which represents the human response to objects in the world (‘items in the field’) by means of the human qualities of thinking, feeling, willing and acting. Every individual has the freedom to choose which objects or items of the human condition he or she wants to love, protect, desire, promote, prioritize, conserve, realize and thus to value. This separate value pattern thus corresponds to a part of the qualities which are comprised in the underlying pattern of the (objective) human condition. For example a specific subjectively chosen pattern may have high valuations in the lower right corner of Figure 1, implying a one sided focus on individualist-materialist values, such as the own physical body. Other patterns might concentrate values in the opposing upper left quadrant, for example in case of a religious orientation. The pattern of the human condition and its valuation as given by the pattern of human nature depicted as separate ‘layers’ in Figure 2.

Virtues and vices are dispositions to change the valuations of the (various items of the) human condition and to act accordingly. They can be seen as vector forces, having strength and direction, which operate on the pattern of human nature. The virtues might be oriented to a telos, a final end, but this is not necessarily the case. On beforehand, there is no criterion yet to judge a certain pattern of human nature as good or bad, as virtuous or vicious. It is the objective of ethics to find such an as much as possible rational and objective criterion.

Macro-history

To that end, in first instance the approach has to be restricted to (empirical) facts, avoiding for the time being naturalist assumptions about human nature. In this respect history is a telling story, as from an overall perspective (macro-)history can be seen as a wandering through the pastern of human nature. Herein the above discussed one sided valuations of the human condition appear to dominate as a ‘Zeitgeist’ over larger periods of time (Toynbee 1946) and Sorokin 1957). In general, the shift to the right-hand side quadrants implies more pluralism and diversity and becomes manifest as scepticism against the universal and institutional doctrines of the left-hand side of the pattern of the human condition. To summarize earlier findings (van Egmond 2014):

- In the Western world, early Christianity was based on the individual beliefs of the individual participants, it typically represents the value orientation of the upper right quadrant (in Figure 1).
- Around 400 a process of universalization was effectuated by the foundation of the Roman Catholic (means universal) church, implying a claim on the one and single truth as it becomes manifest at the upper left-hand side of the human condition pattern (Toynbee, 1946). Ethics was based on biblical revelation of a divine ordained law and the formal and unique interpretation of the church thereof as

given by the catechism. Increasingly, non-commitment was punished heavily by the Inquisition and subsequent wars.

- Finally, in the 16th century, competing claims on the universal truth brought about the Reformation, which runs more or less parallel to the European Renaissance. Value orientations shifted to the centre and the right-hand side of the pattern of the human condition during the 16th century. It became manifest in the reintegration of thought and feeling and in making room for renewed toleration of diversity, ambiguity and uncertainty (Toulmin 1990 p153).
- But in the following Enlightenment, science was the successor of the church in finding again absolute truth. Enlightenment philosophers like Kant now wanted to find a new, rational foundation for objective morality, based on universal, timeless axioms.
- The 'Zeitgeist' of the Enlightenment came to expression in large scale industrialization, which in the 19th century provoked Romanticism. Herein, the human feelings and passions together with spiritual experiences came to the fore, typically representing the individualist, non-materialist values of the opposing upper right quadrant. Ethical norms now were based on the esthetical; the good is the beautiful.
- Returning in Late-Modernism again to the lower left quadrant, the single truth of science generated technology for the hyper-globalization and a science-driven, unprecedented population explosion. In the lowest part of the human value pattern, where the obsession with materialist values reaches its maximum, the combination with the population explosion brought about the ecological crisis.
- In the current lower right 'Post-Modern' quadrant, individualist materialism finds its caricature in neo-liberalism. The idea of a universal truth is fading away, which comes to expression in nowadays propagation of 'alternative facts'.

In this historical process, time and again value orientations shifted to the periphery of the pattern of human nature, became its own caricature, exaggerating very one sided and thus isolated values, which were pursued obsessively without any regard for all the other human values. Many historical catastrophic, unsustainable developments can be explained that way; the inquisition by the Church, the religious wars, the uprisings against the absolute state, communism as extreme collectivism, Nazism as extreme universalism and materialism, the present ecological crises and the 'greed is good' morality in parts of the financial system.

It is concluded that from an historical, empirical point of view, the value orientations beyond the periphery of the circle, where values by definition become one sided and thus isolated, appear to have evil consequences. The other way round, the consequences of orientations within the circle appear to be good. Apparently the so far non-teleological virtues point from the outside the periphery into the circle, perpendicular on the circle-periphery itself.

The psychology of human nature; Jung

Authors like Nussbaum (1999), Annas (2007) and Jordan & Kristjansson (2017) have stressed the importance of psychological insights in the discussion on human nature. The most remarkable observation in this respect is made by Becker in *A new Stoicism* (1998): 'it is no coincidence that the picture of psychological health maps so well onto the ordinary conception of moral character or virtue, while psychopathology has correlates in vice. The psychological picture indeed runs strikingly parallel to the above summarized empirical observations about history. Later it will be shown that this also holds for the concept of the Aristotelian mean (mesotes). In all these cases opposing extreme orientations (outside the circle periphery) turn out to be problematic (psychopathological).

Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung has observed that in search for security, individuals or societies are inclined to identify with the periphery (Jung 1954, Fromm 1942). In the periphery the values lose their mutual coherence and thus become one-sided. This is in agreement with Jung's warning that 'when the separation is carried so far that the complementary opposite is lost sight of, the result is one-sidedness,

which is then compensated from the unconsciousness without our help' (Jung 1945). The result of which will be psychosis, obsessive preoccupation with very one-sided value orientations, which by definition have lost cohesion with the core of human value orientations (within the circle) and thus with human dignity. As such Jung confirms the indicated historical observations. Value orientations outside the circle will result in psychosis, which might be seen as the individual counterpart of social disruption (in-sustainability). Vices point to the domain outside the circle which denoted as the unconsciousness. Again virtues steer away from the periphery to the conscious domain within the circle. So here also discrimination by virtue and vice is possible on scientific (psychological) facts only, which gain more plausibility given their mutual agreement with the empirical historical observations.

Consciousness development as an additional telos

Continuing along these lines, Jung further states that 'the ego keeps its integrity only if it does not identify with one of the opposites, and if it understands how to hold balance between them (1954 p129). This can only be done if it remains aware of both. By bridging the opposites, consciousness inevitably spreads throughout the entire base (of the human condition) and the middle is experienced as self-consciousness'. Against this background, Jung interprets the pattern of (essential) human nature as the representation of the human 'Self', which integrity and internal cohesion has to be maintained and strengthened. It requires restless equilibration of all kinds of opposites. The experience of a real Self in the centre, equilibrating the many opposites, and as such avoiding the vicious periphery comes close to Aristotle's description of 'eudaimonia'. Virtues then appear to be dispositions to change the value orientation into the direction of this telos in the centre, and herewith strengthening the cohesion between the (consciousness) values within the circle as a whole.

This recalls the earlier statement of Williams' (1995) where he refers to first and hardest lessons of Darwinism that there is simply no teleology in nature. However, in the Darwinist process of evolution, consciousness development appears to be the underlying leading principle. It apparently is one of the most likely objectives of human development, and this raises the question why consciousness development might not be seen as a scientifically vindicated human telos.

Neo-Aristotelian ethics

Jung's psychological view on virtues, vices and an eventual telos comes close to Aristotelian ethics. In his *Ethica Nicomachea* (1976, book II-6) Aristotle defines virtue 'as a state of character, a disposition, concerned with choice and lying in a mean which is determined by a rational principle. Herein the choices are again what we value, desire, realize or promote. Virtue is a mean in between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect, between too much and too little'. 'It is a mean because the vices exceed or fall short what is right in passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that what is intermediate', so Aristotle. The mean, and herewith the centre of the circle, is about the final end (telos) of the development, which is 'eudaimonia' and which is related to the centre. As this valuation (by human nature) refers to the human condition, the telos has to be the value orientation which is oriented on the centre of the human condition (Figure 1).

However, Aristotle himself remarks in book II-9 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, that it is not easy to find the mean. He recommends that 'he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary'. This difficulty in finding the intermediate (mean) reflects the human freedom to choose from many different, but still virtuous objectives. Indeed, all value orientations inside the circle periphery have to be morally judged as positive. Within the circle the cohesion between the values and herewith by definition human dignity, is maintained. However, outside the circle boundary this cohesion, and herewith human dignity is lost. Single isolated values start to dominate obsessively. Aristotle finds these many one-sided, vicious shifts outside the periphery more easy identifiable than the precise position of the (virtuous) centre. Herewith Aristotle confirms the earlier discussed more empirical results from historical and

psychological analysis which were only based on the experience that orientations outside the circle are vicious. In these cases, there was no outspoken telos. Nevertheless, vices could be discriminated from virtues. It might be said alternatively that the telos in this case is only the avoidance of the vicious periphery. This is illustrated by Aristotle's striking statement that 'not everyone, but only one who knows, finds the midpoint in a circle'. The ethical framework does not start from the telos in the centre, but from the periphery; the circle defines the centre (and thus the telos), not vice versa.

Virtues thus are centripetal forces. By far the most important centripetal force is 'love' in which the individual is invited to value not only his own existence (right hand side values) or his own relatives (more to the left), but also more distant people, as well as his physical environment, including nature (lower left in Figure 1). It is the central theme in Christianity and many other spiritual orientations. Aristotle calls this most important, overarching virtue 'friendship' (*philia*). It is about empathy, respect and valuation of the diagonal opposing elements of the human condition. These centripetal forces appear to increase cohesion between the (typically) human values.

In contrast, vices are centrifugal forces, which bring about fragmentation of human nature. As soon as the dominating value orientation shifts into the periphery of the pattern of essential human nature, the respective values become so fragmented that any cohesion with the other values constituting 'human nature' is lost altogether. Human functioning is no longer based on, or related to the whole array of coherent values and faculties (within the circle) which makes people human. Herewith 'sustainability' is lost, given the disruptive consequences which have to be faced in the periphery.

Dynamic equilibrium

All theoretical and empirical observations made so far, point to the conclusion that 'living well' is all about maintaining a dynamic equilibrium within the periphery. Human freedom allows all sorts of valuations, which might fluctuate through the pattern of the human condition. The telos is given by both consciousness development and sustainability, as the disruptions of the periphery are avoided within the virtuous circle. So the task of all times is to consciously moderate these fluctuations within the evil boundaries. Herewith the functioning of human nature is congruent with the functioning of nature at large. Existence is only possible by maintaining dynamic equilibrium.

Cultural confirmation

The ethics informed pattern of tutored human nature, turns out to be overwhelmingly expressed in art and culture throughout the centuries (van Egmond, 2014). Not only many myths (Icarus), legends (King Arthur) and fairy tales (Cinderella), but also musical compositions (Mozart, Wagner) and many great works of literature, such as those of Shakespeare refer to this basic pattern. The latter is an exponent of European Renaissance, among many others influenced by Da Vinci, who's drawing of the Vitruvian man (the background of Figure 1) depicts the Renaissance theme of 'squaring the circle'. Herein man is seen as fitting both in the square, representing the physical (body) and in the circle, representing the 'spiritual', thus reconciling mind and matter in the vertical divide.

In all these representations of Figure 1, both the human life and the social development is a quest towards consciousness development. Only through coping with the many harms, dangers, temptations and distractions, the final end, the telos of the mission is gradually to be understood (Campbell 1949). The virtuous quest is to reach the centre by virtuous behaviour. In Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, civilization (Walhalla) is lost as the centrifugal forces are too strong. However, in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the fellowship of the ring is based on 'friendship' as the most dominant centripetal force, through which the periphery can be avoided and 'middle earth' can be saved.

Often the circular pattern of the human condition and nature is described by the metaphor of the island, for example in Shakespeare's *the Tempest* and in the legend of the *Flying Dutchman*. The mainland of the

island represents the conscious part, which has to be reached from the surrounding sea which stands for the unconsciousness.

Statistical social survey confirmation

The pattern of the human condition, and the valuations thereof, were further confirmed by an earlier social survey (van Egmond and de Vries, 2011, van Egmond 2014) in the Netherlands. The study was based on Rokeach system of value ranking and the earlier study of Schwartz and Bilsky (1987). The resulting value pattern was (statistically) dominated by two main (principal) components: the horizontal contrast between individual and collective and the (vertical) contrast between ‘taking’/ materialist and ‘giving’/ non-materialist, including ‘spiritual life’. These two principle components correspond to pattern of the human condition. In the lower left quadrant 2/3 of the respondents were male; in the opposing upper-right quadrant 2/3 was female. These ratios represent the contrast between masculine and feminine value orientations.

The renewed moral framework

It goes without saying that the real, factual pattern of human nature, be it on an individual or on a societal scale, deviates from the ethical idealized pattern, in which only (human) conditions within the circle are valued. People are free to chose all sorts of valuations, both inside and outside the circle, be it that the latter might be denoted as vicious. Following MacIntyre (1981) the actual pattern might be denoted as ‘untutored’ human nature which by means of the suggested ethics can be transformed in ‘tutored’ human nature by promoting certain values and denigrating others.

To maintain clarity and allow more precise definitions of the quantities involved, the overall scheme of reasoning is given and illustrated by Figure 2, in which the different quantities are represented as levels. Only the pattern ‘tutored’ human nature is depicted, as ethical informed valuation of the underlying pattern of the human condition. Below the human condition, the additional pattern of the economic condition (of the outside world) is positioned:

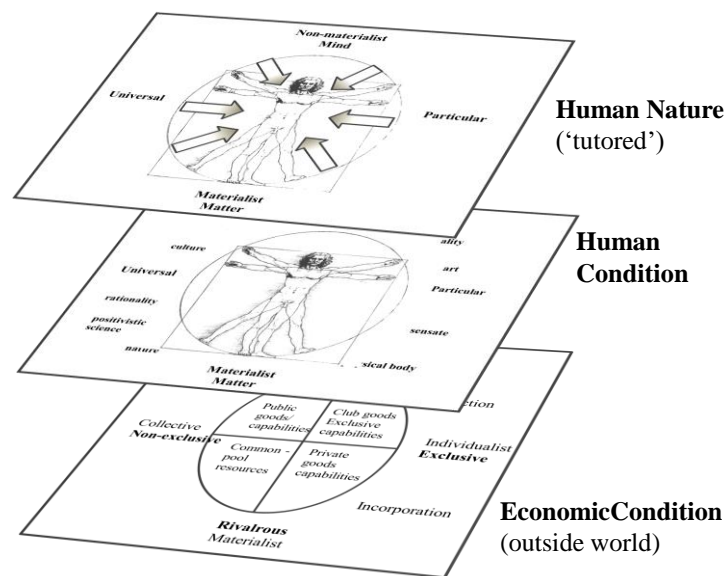


Figure 2: The three levels of the ethical framework.

The economic condition

The economic condition of the outside world forms the lowest level and can be seen as the means which further enhances the potential of the human condition to achieve its final ends. Not surprisingly the structure of the economic goods to a large extent corresponds to the structure of the human condition. The vertical contrast between the materialist and the non-materialist items runs parallel to the economic difference between rivalrous and non-rivalrous goods. Non-materialist goods, like culture, insights, information are non-rivalrous, as they will not run out of supply by increasing consumption, in contrast to most of the physical-material goods.

The horizontal contrast between individual and collective runs parallel with the categories of exclusive versus non-exclusive goods. Individualism tends to make goods, whether rivalrous or not, exclusive, often by appropriation. It results in the demarcation between public and private goods. Combination of the two axes produces the four basic categories (quadrants) of economic goods:

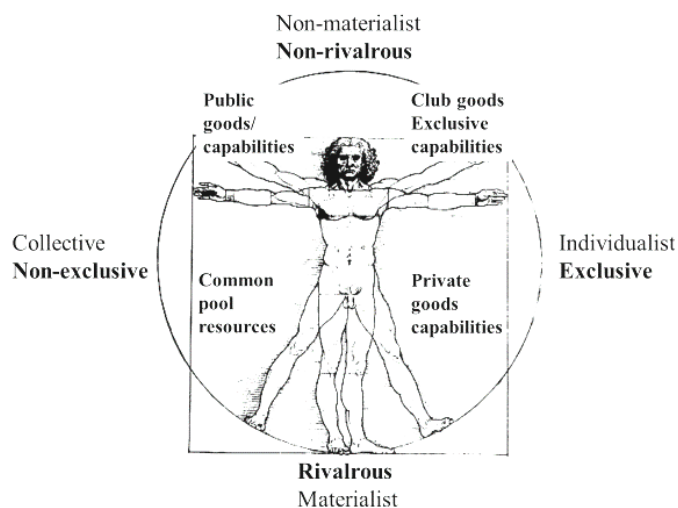


Figure 3 The economic condition, as corresponding to the human condition.

Private goods are rivalrous and exclusive and might be considered as ‘protheses of the human body’ (Munzer 1990) such as housing (shelter), clothes and phones;

Common goods are rivalrous, but not exclusive; they can be considered as owned by the community; nature areas, drinking water, fresh air etc;

Public goods are neither rivalrous nor exclusive and are limitless available for everybody; cultural heritage, intellectual / scientific insights (like the Pythagoras theorem);

Club goods are not rivalrous, but nevertheless exclusive, for example intellectual property such as patents.

The process of valuation of items of the human condition is highly influenced by the availability of the underlying economic means. It demonstrates how the economic domain is linked to human nature. It thus cannot be considered to be value-free. The economic system has to realize the (ethical) choices which are made at the higher level.

The correspondence between the three different levels now to some extent allow moral judgements about the economical level. As the moral ‘good’ appears to point to the centre of the patterns of both human nature and the human condition, also in the corresponding economical domain, the ‘good’ is expected to point to the centre. This implies equilibrium between the public and the private domain, between common pool resources and private goods. In the vertical direction materialist versus non-materialist has to be

balanced within specific boundaries. In a next paragraph it will be shown that the extension of the framework to the economic condition, allows concrete, policy relevant moral deliberation.

Meeting the initial specifications

The sustainability ethical framework presented here meets the requirements which were initially formulated:

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- Kant's categorical imperative discriminates virtues from vices by testing whether individual principles can be universalized to the collective. In the current framework this translates to the equal valuation of the individual and universal / collective qualities. This equal valuation corresponds to positions on the vertical axis. The pattern of the human condition was purposefully based on the contrast between the particular versus the universal.
- Consequentialist elements can be recognized in the respective consequences of virtues and vices towards the eudaimonia / consciousness centre and the catastrophic, unconscious periphery.
- Nussbaum (2013) ambition to answer the relativist, without (ethical) relativism, is accommodated by the pattern of the human condition, which encompasses most of the actually diverging value orientations. The quadrants of the pattern represent 'worldviews' which differ over time (as the Zeitgeist) or in space as cultural differences. The ethical scheme is independent of these differences.
- Ethical naturalism forms the basis for the pattern of the biologically and socially (objectively) vindicated human condition. In contrast the pattern of human nature allows for subjective choice and free will.
- Nevertheless, the resulting ethical scheme has a high degree of objectivity, based on empirical observations from (macro-)history and psychology, without the assumption of an explicit telos. Virtues were found to point from outside the periphery to inside the circle.
- Extrapolating these empirical results, both Jungian psychology and Aristotelian ethics suggest consciousness development as an additional, explicit telos.
- The pattern of the human condition as well as the process of its valuation by human nature is independent of time. This implies that the ethical implications for present and future generations are the same.
- Feminist values are statistically related to the upper-right quadrant. Given the apparent counter clockwise of the 'Zeitgeist' through the pattern of the human condition, feminine value orientations are expected to become more dominant (as possibly indicated by the current 'Me-Too' movement)..

Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

It is unavoidable that a moral framework for the Anthropocene is anthropocentric. It is the human being (anthropos) who has to redefine its moral position. There is less focus on the 'rights' of nature. However, as described by Louke van Wensveen (2000), virtue ethics will become more relevant for ecological questions. In the approach chosen here, it appears as an integral part of an ethics of sustainability. In that virtue ethical framework, the (social) 'others' at the upper left and 'nature', as the physical other, at the lower left are integral parts of essential human nature (in Figure 1). In maintaining the virtuous orientations on the mean in the centre, respect for the others and for nature will be generated implicitly. The return to a more balanced, thus essential human nature, implies a less materialist orientation, which will reduce the ecological problem and will make room for other species in nature. It also implies a less individualist orientation which less inclination to appropriation, leaving more room for (global) commons. In this anthropocentric view, a more sustainable situation is reached by reducing the rights of humans, not by extending the 'rights' of forests and rivers.

Sustainability

The telos of the ethical framework as emerging in the centre of the ethics informed, tutored human nature pattern thus appears to consist of two, mutually re-enforcing and telling principles: sustainability and consciousness development. (Macro-)history and many cultural expressions suggests centrifugal shifts to be considered as vice, which time and again ends in catastrophe and un-sustainability. In contrast, centripetal value orientations appear to avoid these discontinuities and thus attain sustainability.

Sustainability is the capability to maintain the dynamic equilibrium between the fundamental polarities in essential human nature. Given the identified correspondence between the human condition and the (outside world) economic condition, the ethical framework implies individual and social functioning within the physical / ecological boundaries of the planet, as indicated over the last 50 years by Meadows (1972), RIVM (1988), Steffen and Rockström (2015) and Raworth (2017).

As discussed, the real needs of future generations as represented by the normative pattern of essential human nature, are ‘essentially’ the same as the needs of the present generation. Future and present generations are guided by the same moral compass, which point to the centre of the human condition.

The identified current problems in both the social (people), ecological (planet) and financial-economical (profit) domains only can be solved on a more fundamental level by shifting value orientations to the centre, or at least avoid them to shift to the periphery. In the present situation this suggests society to shift to less material intensive and less individualist (egotistic) orientations, which legitimates among other things the following policies:

- In the first place the current neo-liberal orientation (in the lower-right quadrant) takes extreme positions in the corresponding *public–private demarcation* at the level of economic means. Since the ‘90-ties public goods and global commons have been privatized and commodified. The balance between private property and public commons, as implied by the ethical framework is lost. Small private elites have taken control over major public interests, which by definition implies a feudal society. The subsequent financialization of the world is the outspoken caricature of the lower right quadrant, representing the current, one-sided *Zeitgeist*.
- The diagonal upper left orientation is fundamentalist as well. Rather than an obsessive individual-materialist orientation, the obsession here is a dogmatic caricature of the collective-metaphysical orientation as it is expressed by institutional religion. Just as Christian religions earlier in European history, inherently conflicting *claims on the universal truth* are made, typically for the left-hand side of the pattern. As argued in this paper, claims on the ultimate universal truth lack moral vindication.
- Also one-sided materialist orientations (in the downward direction) are to be considered as vices. The current ecological crisis is the result of over-valuation of the materialist qualities. Value orientations have to shift to the centre, where less material intensive, and thus ecological sustainable conditions can be maintained. This implies less use of fossil fuels (*climate change*) and virgin materials (circular economy). To achieve this in the market-oriented economies of the currently dominating lower right quadrant, financial incentives such as CO₂-price and taxation on virgin material use, are effective mechanisms which are legitimated by the moral framework presented here.
- Given the shift of the ‘*Zeitgeist*’ from the lower left to the lower right quadrant, (*hyper-*) *globalization* is already on its way back, although its effects due to outsourcing (unemployment), increased economic dependency and ecological vulnerability (Corona-outbreak) are still heavily felt. The balance between local sovereignty (individuality; i.e. European scale) and the universal global system should be maintained.
- As was concluded from the social survey which constituted the ‘human condition’ of Figure 1, the diagonal lower left-upper right contrast (also) represents the masculine – feminine polarity respectively. *Gender-equality* also thus is a pre-requisite for the reconciliation of the opposites in the centre.

Conclusion

Sustainability thus appears as a process of maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between the essential faculties of human nature; between the materialist and the non-materialist qualities and between the individual-private and the collective-public qualities. Such a moral compass would legitimize concrete and effective policies to curb the current development in an unsustainable direction. It repudiates the moral legitimacy of the current obsessive orientation on individual-materialist values. This legitimization is based on the presented ethical framework. The framework is as robust as possible with respect to ethical questions about naturalism, relativism, objectivism and the meaning of telos.

Acknowledgements

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