

Title page:

The Narrative of a new Renaissance (revised)

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Abstract

199 words

In the uncertain and worrying circumstances of today's post-normal times, politicians and philosophers have called for a new narrative and a new 'renaissance'. In response, we formulate such a narrative as the representation of a "preferred future," based on a renewed moral framework derived from an underlying, all-encompassing understanding of human nature. In various guises, this view of human nature can be found as a constant pattern, recurring again and again over the centuries, as evidenced by macro-history and the insights of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and culture. It spans the opposites of the collective versus the individual and of mind versus matter. Only by maintaining a certain balance in the appreciation of these four fundamental aspects of human nature can society be sustained.

Until now, however, value orientations have always become one-sided, after which human dignity has been lost, resulting in religious wars, colonialism, ecological crisis and a monopolistic economy. The "preferred" future is the only viable one: based on a full awareness of human nature, of the basic moral framework that rests upon it, and of its concrete applications in, for example, the economic sector. It defines a future that recalls the balanced worldview of our earlier Renaissance.

Key words: macro-history, worldview, human nature, virtue ethics, moral framework, sustainability.

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Both authors equally contributed to the current paper, which draws on their respective university backgrounds in sustainability sciences and philosophy. In particular:

Klaas van Egmond: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, original draft

Jesse Mulder: methodology, investigation, validation, writing-review and editing

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In the uncertain and worrying circumstances of today's post-normal times, politicians and philosophers have called for a new narrative and a new 'renaissance'. In response, we formulate such a narrative as the representation of a "preferred future," based on a renewed moral framework derived from an underlying, all-encompassing understanding of human nature. In various guises, this view of human nature can be found as a constant pattern, recurring again and again over the centuries, as evidenced by macro-history and the insights of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and culture. It spans the opposites of the collective versus the individual and of mind versus matter. Only by maintaining a certain balance in the appreciation of these four fundamental aspects of human nature can society be sustained.

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1 Introduction

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The future has already begun. Half a century after Meadows (1972) became aware of the limits to growth, the world's population is already experiencing the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss. The global economy is ecologically crossing planetary boundaries (Rockström, 2009) due to consumption patterns and overpopulation. Despite the numerous impressive (but reductionist) scenario studies on global change that have been developed over the past 40 years, no effective policies have been implemented. Current 'green growth' policies will, at best, reduce the continuously increasing environmental impact of continued economic growth (Naudé, 2023). The alternative policy of a shrinking, 'degrowth' economy (in the Global North) is hardly politically feasible, since the distributional issues, which will then be exacerbated, entail social and subsequent political tensions. As early as 1977, Hirsch had warned that the social limits of growth would also be reached. As a first confirmation, the statistical findings of Piketty (2014) show a sharp increase in inequality. How can we make sense of half a century of failed scenario planning and policy development?

What went wrong here is understood by Slaughter (1996) as the overvaluation of science, technology, and instrumental reason in studying the now overarching problem of global system change. Scenario methodology failed to address in depth the problems of people, organizations, cultures in stress and transformation (Slaughter, 2002; Bowden, 2021). The importance of the inner world and the role of worldviews in creating our reality have been overlooked. The role of long-term, worldview-driven ways of thinking, such as 'modernity' with its many implicit assumptions and value orientations, has also been underestimated. Slaughter (2002) cites the rise of denial and the consequent inhibition of constructive responses as another cause of failure. This raises the question of whether this denial can also be understood from a dominant worldview, in this case postmodernity, with its post-truth, individualistic-materialistic egocentrism and the consequent pursuit of personal interest.

Against this backdrop, Slaughter has become less optimistic. As noted by Bowden (2021), in his earlier work (1996) he argued that there was still time to make the transition to a more sustainable world a reality, implying that the future remained open. But in 2020, he argues that "the search for

'alternative futures' in itself is becoming increasingly problematic as a mosaic-like but almost singular macro-future weighs on humanity." The window of viable futures is shrinking. The belief that 'preferred futures' could be realised has faded.

Recognizing that "preferred futures" inherently presuppose an ethical-moral framework, Slaughter's conclusion is supported by MacIntyre's philosophical view, which stated that "in the real world we inhabit, the language of morality today is in a state of grave disorder. It is caused by the fact that we now possess only the remaining fragments of an earlier conceptual moral scheme" (MacIntyre, 1981). This position is also taken by Sardar (2015) who argues that the exploration of the future must explicitly address ethical issues; "we need a clearer, stronger ethical compass." As a final way out of the pessimistic outlook, he previously suggested (2010) that "a decisive sense of ethical responsibility could persuade the rich and powerful to become more modest in their demands and lifestyles, more humble, indeed willing to temper the licentiousness of their lifestyles and the disproportionate use of limited global resources that this requires".

Ethics is usually derived from concepts of 'human nature' (most clearly in 'ethical naturalism'). Slaughter (2002) also looks in this direction when he wonders if the most powerful sources of inspiration would come from a persistent engagement with humanity's "higher self"; whether spiritual insight could stimulate the transition beyond industrialism. He suggested Wilber's Integral Vision of a society reshaped by advanced spiritual awareness and capacity, as one of the clearest expressions of this impulse. Indeed, such an 'integral worldview'-encompassing approach would transcend the previous, fragmented and reductionist scenario studies and could offer an attractive perspective for change. As such, it is at odds with the views of current mainstream, postmodern philosophy, which defines itself as "the disbelief in meta-narratives" (Lyotard, 1979). This must be understood from the postmodern view in which the world is conceived as pluralistic, a wide range of very different people, ideas, beliefs, norms, and judgments (Dews, 1986). Yet the call for a new narrative is getting louder. For example, visionary French President Macron declared "that we must reinvent the shape of our civilization politically and culturally in a changing world." Given that "a European ethic is lacking", he called for a "European Renaissance", in which we must redefine our understanding of the values of progress. He proposed to rebuild a collective narrative on this basis (Macron, 2019).

Against this urgent backdrop, this article aims to mobilize the many methodological insights that have emerged over the past decades to apply them in formulating a concrete narrative that can help us navigate out of our current critical situation. To this end, we intend to transcend all this diversity, fragmentation and complexity, by working our way towards the acceptance of an overarching concept, from which a plausible narrative can be formulated.

2 Methodology and Outline

The most fundamental assumption underlying our approach is articulated by Slaughter (2002) as follows: "the 'inner' world appears to precede and underlie the 'outer'". This can be interpreted in a very broad sense, for instance as the idea that the material, physical world is largely shaped by the (inner) worldviews of humans, especially now that we have entered the 'Anthropocene'.

The narrative sought is implicitly based on a certain notion of a social purpose, a vision of 'the good life' and of the 'flourishing' of the individual human being and of society as a whole. Such a goal or 'telos' must be achieved through an ethical framework, as emphasized by the aforementioned politicians and philosophers. In ethical naturalism, this framework is based on a conception of "human nature." It assumes that the individual and/or societal goal is achieved when human nature reaches its completion, its full actualization. This means that ethical views or theories must be derived from human nature. The resulting ethical insights can then be translated into a practical moral framework, which in turn allows for the formulation of a narrative, as a 'morally preferred future'.

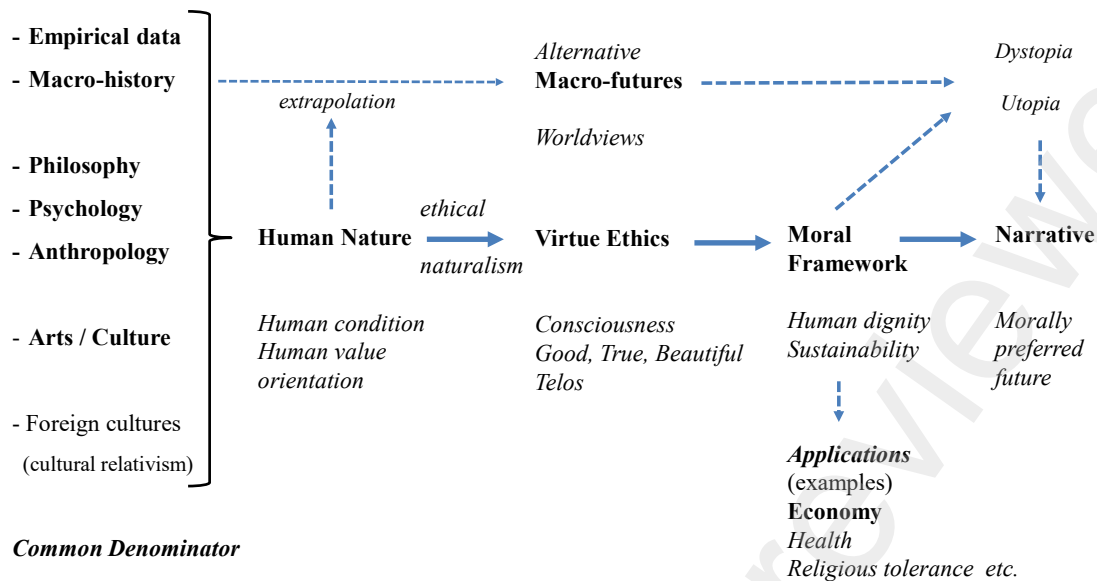


Figure 1 Methodology

The methodology, and thus the main features of this document, is shown in Figure 1:

1. In the first step, the *conceptualization of "human nature"* is derived as the "common denominator" that emerges from as many different sources as possible in macro-history and empirical data on contemporary human value orientations, in the sciences of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and in art and culture. Although the whole exercise can be seen as primarily focused on the critical position of the Western world, a few comparisons with non-Western cultures will be made, to illustrate how the proposed framework incorporates and transcends 'cultural relativism': § 3
2. Since the emerging view of human nature appears to differ from Wilber's Integral Vision, Slaughter's (2002) suggestion to apply Wilber's scheme is not followed: § 3.
3. From the emergent pattern of human nature, a *virtue ethics framework* will be derived along the lines of ethical naturalism: § 4.
 1. The resulting virtue ethical 'theory' will be translated into a *practical moral framework*, which makes it possible to distinguish between several dystopian alternative futures and a single remaining utopian future: § 5.
 4. To demonstrate the applicability of the framework and its current importance, the *economic system* and the resulting moral implications are provided as a concrete example in § 6.
 5. As a beckoning perspective, the *narrative is* derived from the utopian, preferred future: § 7.

3 The conceptualization of human nature

The first steps of the iterative process of arriving at a conceptualization of human nature are based on empirical findings. Macro history is reconstructed by mapping the dynamic behaviour of value orientations over time. The reconstruction is supported by current social value orientations, obtained by means of a social survey.

3.1 Current value orientations

In the social survey just mentioned, the value orientations according to Rokeach (1973) were determined. The variability of these valuations was (statistically) dominated by two main components: the horizontal opposition (axis) between individual and collective and the (vertical) opposition (axis) between "taking"/materialistic and "giving"/non-materialistic, including "spiritual life" (van Egmond and de Vries, 2011). The total variability could therefore be meaningfully reduced to these two

dimensions. In the resulting pattern (x, y axes), the value orientations are mapped as a continuum. This initial scheme supports the schematization of macro-history.

3.2 Macro-history

Sorokin (1957) and Toulmin (1990), who studied the dynamic behaviour of dominant value orientations in especially European history, also concluded that these dynamics can be described using a two-dimensional pattern. Sorokin concludes that "from logical and factual evidence it is reasonably certain that an enormous number of socio-cultural systems and processes have a limited range of possibilities in their variation, in the creation of new fundamental forms" (p. 660). Apparently, the dynamics can still be effectively understood if their fluctuations are reduced to just a few dimensions. Assuming that history can be seen as an expression of 'human nature', the expectation is that this underlying, non-varying two-dimensional pattern represents and contains all relevant value orientations of this 'human nature'. The predominant orientation 'travels' through this underlying pattern along a historical trajectory. This means that we have dissected "*human nature*" into two components:

1. The *human condition*, or the 'condition of human existence', which can be seen as given by the physical, biological, psychological and spiritual conditions or 'qualities' of existence, independent of both time and 'subjective' human choice. Thus, it can be seen as the underlying, unvarying, two-dimensional "objective" background of human life and history.
2. The predominant *human orientation*, namely the subjective appreciation of (parts of) this objective human condition. It varies over time and probably also in space (countries, communities) within the (unchanging) two-dimensional pattern of the human condition.

Thus, the human orientation sequentially values or emphasizes specific parts of the larger, total pattern of the human condition. Given this understanding of 'human nature', history can thus be seen as a wandering of the changing human orientation (the 'Zeitgeist') through the static pattern of the human condition. Drawing on both the work of Sorokin and Toulmin, as well as the results of the aforementioned social survey, the meta-historical analysis suggests that the human condition can be described by two opposites, representing the two axes of the two-dimensional pattern:

1. The first, '*horizontal*' opposition, describes the contrast between the orientation towards the 'universal', in which society is seen as a coherent, uniform whole, without much difference in space and time, versus the orientation towards the individual and the 'particular', which inherently implies a high degree of social diversity and differentiation. The respective social orientations are called universalism or collectivism, and singularism or individualism.
2. The second, '*vertical*' opposition is the opposition between a non-materialist and a materialist value orientation, which Sorokin refers to as idealism versus materialism.

Inspired by Spinoza's plea to make the reasoning and proposed definitions of studies such as this as transparent as possible through a 'geometric method', we prefer to present the respective concepts as schematic, geometric patterns (Nadler, 2006, 35). Figure 2 schematically describes the historical trajectory of the successively dominant human (value) orientations (Zeitgeist) in the two-dimensional pattern of the human condition:

- Early Christianity was based on the individual beliefs of the individual participants: it typically represents the value orientation of the upper right quadrant (or 'worldview').
- Around 400, a process of universalization was brought about by the establishment of the Roman Catholic (i.e. universal) church, implying a claim to the one and only truth as it manifested on the upper left side of the human condition. According to Sorokin (1957, 308), the predominant value orientation in the Middle Ages was non-materialistic and 'spiritual'. However, in the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, during the process of secularization, the spiritual component weakened in favour of the materialist. As a result, the predominant (vertical) orientation was balanced at the centre of the human condition.

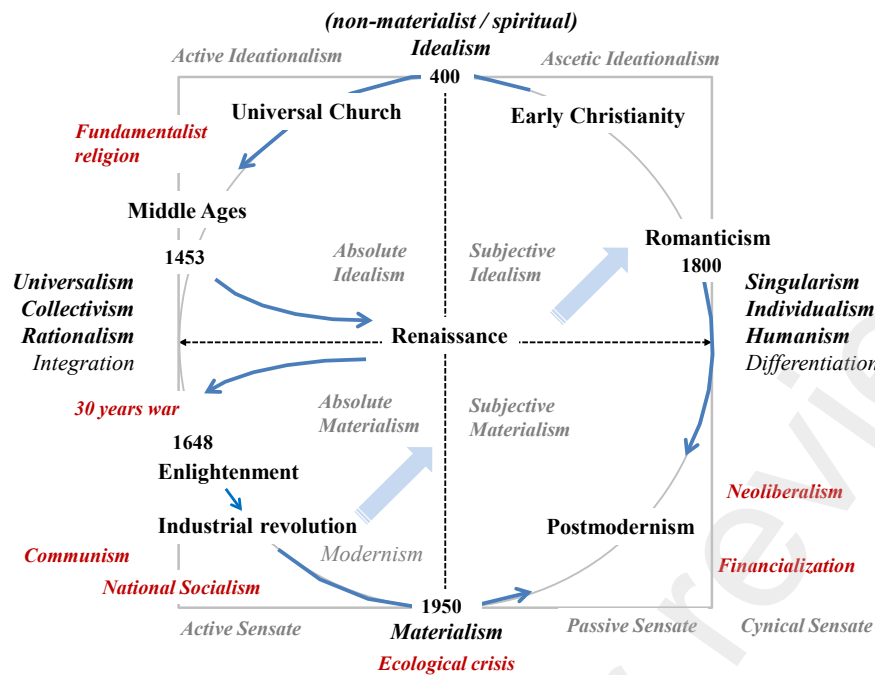


Figure 2. Trajectory of dominant human (value) orientations (Zeitgeist) in European meta-history against the background of the human condition.

- After the fall of Byzantium in 1453, many Byzantine scholars settled in the west, particularly in northern Italy. They brought about a renewed interest in the earlier philosophical frameworks of Plato and Aristotle. As will be discussed in the next section, this implied a balanced concern in the horizontal direction for both theoretical speculation and practical experience (Toulmin, 1990, 27). This double (vertical and horizontal) equilibrium and consequent positioning at the centre of the human condition is the nature of the Renaissance. It gave rise to tolerance, harmony and creativity in all areas of society, in science, art, governance and economics.
- In 1618, however, the universal Catholic Church sought to return to the "absolute idealism" (top left) of the pre-Renaissance and the associated absolute truth of the Church. This led to the catastrophic 30-year war.
- After 1648 the return to universalism was complete, although the downward, materialistic tendency of the later Enlightenment (1750-1800) continued.
- As a result, due to the renewed emphasis on rationalism (Descartes) and theoretical-scientific concepts, the truth of the Church was replaced by the (one and only) truth of science, which made the Industrial Revolution possible.
- According to Sorokin's empirical findings, the increase in materialist orientations in general required a simultaneous increase in individualistic orientation. This explains why the trajectory since the Renaissance has not only been downward (secularization), but at the same time shifted towards individualism on the right.
- The universal rational thinking of the Enlightenment at the bottom left (and the subsequent industrial revolution) provoked the compensatory response of the one-sided part of the human condition at the top right. It brought about 19th-century Romanticism as an expression of individual emotional (and spiritual) feelings. During this period, the "modernist" lower left corner and the individualistic upper right developed simultaneously.
- In the lower left modernist quadrant, caricatures developed from an increasingly one-sided universalism and uniformity. In this, orientations turned into their own caricature, exaggerating very one-sided and therefore isolated values, obsessively pursued at the expense of all other human values. For example, the motto of the Catholics in France was "un roi, une loi, une foi", Eastern

Europe was committed to communism and it called on National Socialism to be 'ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer'. All these caricatures turned into catastrophes.

- The universal science of late modernism in the lower left quadrant generated technology for hyper-globalization and the science-driven, unprecedented population explosion. In the lowest part of the human value pattern, where the one-sided orientation towards materialistic values is now reaching its maximum, hyper-consumption combined with the population explosion has brought about the ecological crisis.
- The current 'postmodern' quadrant at the bottom right (worldview) is the amalgam of the double trajectories of the universal materialism of the Enlightenment and of romantic individualism as it later evolved into Nietzsche's views. The neoliberal movement of the 1990s radically shifted the position from the lower left quadrant to the lower right quadrant, with its still materialistic but stronger individualistic orientation. The caricature here is the financial system and the unilateral privatization and appropriation of earlier collectivist commons.

Apparently, the European macro-history of the past millennium can indeed be described as the wandering of the predominant human value orientation through the non-varying, more 'objective' pattern of the human condition. This brings us to the first approximate conceptions and definitions of the (objective) condition of human existence and the (subjective) human value orientation as constituent parts and expressions of human nature. By dissecting human nature into human condition and human orientation, we avoid in advance the many confusing differences in the understanding of 'human nature'. As will be discussed below, this is particularly important with regard to the required formulation of a renewed moral framework.

It is concluded that in the historical process, the dominant human value orientations have time and again become so one-sided and isolated that they have been obsessively pursued without regard to, and at the expense of, all other human values. Beyond the periphery of the pattern of the human condition, the coherence between human values is lost and the system collapses. Many historical catastrophes, and thus very unsustainable developments, can be explained by this overshoot of the value orientation and the subsequent collapse. To understand this 'overshoot and collapse' mechanism, the core philosophical, psychological, and cultural qualities of the human condition must be understood, alongside historical developments. The more these sources corroborate each other, the more meaning and 'objectivity' can be attributed to the sketched pattern of the human condition.

3.3 Philosophy

Starting from the preliminary pattern of the human condition, as obtained from empirical analysis of current and historical value orientations, further confirmation is sought in philosophy. The approach is based on the shared views of MacIntyre (1981) and the aforementioned Toulmin, which are relevant to the translation of 'human nature' into an ethical scheme we intend to turn to later on. MacIntyre explains the "state of grave disorder of our contemporary morality from the failure of eighteenth-century moral philosophers to find a rational basis for their moral convictions in a particular understanding of human nature" (p. 55). Referring to Figure 2, MacIntyre suggests that in the centuries since the Renaissance, the dominant value orientations have been very one-sided. The 'specific understanding of human nature' apparently refers to this one-sided view(s) of the overall human condition, rather than the whole. It explains the failure of Kant on the one hand and Nietzsche on the other. Therefore, both MacIntyre (p 259) and Toulmin (p 174) propose a return to the Aristotelian tradition, which amounts to a return to the balanced orientation of the Renaissance. Against this background, and given the limitations of this article, our search for philosophical confirmation will be limited to the works of Plato and Aristotle as rediscovered during the Renaissance, the earlier Renaissance scholar Nicholas of Cusa and the post-Renaissance views of Spinoza, Hegel, Steiner, MacIntyre, and Wilber.

As already indicated, earlier Byzantine scholars contributed to the rediscovery of Greek and Roman thought in Europe during the Renaissance, in particular the balanced views of *Plato and Aristotle*. This

explains the similarly balanced position of the Renaissance at the centre of the human condition in Figure 2.

- *Plato* assumed that human nature is part of a cosmic order and harmony. He presented this cosmic order in the form of his realm of Forms: immutable essences that reside in a realm of eternal truth and value (Moravcsik, 1992). These are not linguistic inventions or abstractions, but fundamental elements of reality. They can be understood as ideal "archetypes" or universal counterparts of the many imperfect sensory-material particularities. Plato's Forms thus legitimize the 'universal' designation of the left side of the horizontal axis. They must be reflected in the social order. Unity in a society is therefore fundamental to its health. This would legitimize the policy of public order.
- *Aristotle*, on the other hand, is more sensitive to the specific, indirect nature of practical issues, and makes room for diversity and contextual dependence (Aristotle, 2010, Book I-6). Aristotle argues that a society is by nature a plurality and therefore an excess of unity is inevitably destructive. He is willing to tolerate some disorder for the sake of individual autonomy (Leonardis, 1998, 86).

These balanced, opposing views confirm the 'horizontal' opposition between the universal and the particular, between uniformity and diversity, and between the collective and the individual. The result of this equilibrium is what can be called the "humanism of the Renaissance." In a spirit of tolerance, different views were accepted. Theoretical speculations went hand in hand with concrete experience and empirical studies, which gave impetus to science.

Already in the early Renaissance, the mathematician and astronomer *Nicholas of Cusa* (Cusanus, 1401-1464) started from this horizontal opposition between the Platonic and Aristotelian views and thus from the opposition between the universal and the particular. The essence of Cusanus' vision is that these opposites can coincide and yet continue to exist in a separate way (Leonardis, 1998, 18-19). The opposites then complement each other in a union that mutually reinforces their individuality (Ibid., 49).

Also with regard to the vertical contrast of the human condition, Cusanus' vision was mainly based on Plato's philosophy. In his *Phaedo*, Plato suggests the separation between soul and body, spirit and matter (Haas, 1996, 7). In line with this, Cusanus sees man as subject to the limitations of the physical world, but at the same time as elevated above those limitations by the power of his creative mind. And as with the horizontal axis, Cusanus also applies his "theory of the coincidence of opposites" to the vertical axis. This implies that in man the finite (matter) and the infinite (spirit) must coincide, which in Renaissance terms corresponds to the coincidence of the microcosm of the finite physical world and the macrocosm of the infinite, spiritual absolute. Both worlds were metaphorically represented as the finite square and the infinite circle. Because microcosm and macrocosm coincide in humans, the dimensions (circumference) of square and circle had to be equal (Germ, 2007). This unification of matter and spirit in man was described later (around 1480) by Leonardo da Vinci, who was at least familiar with some of Cusanus' ideas. In his famous drawing of the 'Vitruvian Man', as shown in the background of Figure 3, the human proportions clearly reflect the specific relationship between square and circle: when the figure stands firmly, the figure is inscribed in the square of physical matter, but when the outstretched limbs of the man are turned, they form the circle of the spiritual spirit. Man is the union of both matter and spirit.

In the years after the Renaissance, the Portuguese-Dutch philosopher *Spinoza* (1632-1677) also saw man as consisting of a unity of mind and body; the human mind is nothing but the 'idea' of the human body (Nadler, 2006, 68). He designates the mind as Thought (the nature of mental things) and the body as Extension (the nature of material things). Thus, similar to the views of Cusanus, Spinoza argues that Thought and Extension are "one and the same things, expressing themselves in two different ways" (Nadler, 129).

In the horizontal dimension, he makes a distinction between 'commons' and 'singular things' (Nadler, 178-180). In this, commons differ from universals in that they are not generalizations of particulars, but more directly given, bringing them closer to Plato's Forms. Thus, while commons "do not explain the essence of a singular thing, they do provide the conceptual and explanatory framework within which the truth of singular things can be apprehended" (Nadler, 180).

In our very brief macro-historical summary, history is seen as a wandering through the human condition, shifting back and forth between the fundamental opposites. It reflects typically *Hegel's* dialectical view of history, namely the movement between these opposites, in which one position provokes the overvaluation of the other. This explains the recurrent transgression of the periphery and the subsequent return of catastrophe. In his spiral view of history, Hegel's solution to these dialectical paradoxes is to reconcile them in a higher unity. The reconciliation in the vertical is between spirit and matter, in the horizontal between the universal and the particular. What Hegel calls 'Geist' is understood as the (consciousness of) the overarching whole of reality (Hegel, 2001, p. 31; Taylor, 1979, p. 47). The 'Zeit-Geist' is the worldview as a temporarily dominant part (or quadrant, worldview) of that larger whole.

Similar to Hegel's view of macro-history, *Steiner* (1918) describes history as a 'symptomatologic' process, which seeks to perceive the underlying flow of the evolution of (world) history. Here, too, the process evolves in the direction of consciousness expansion through the subsequent experience of one-sided worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) as opposing parts of a larger whole. Steiner draws this larger whole (the human condition) as a two-dimensional pattern in which the 'vertical' axis is represented by the opposition between mind (spirit) and matter. Although Steiner sees matter as the manifestation of the underlying spirit, he describes the materialistic and "spiritual" worldviews as equal and symmetrical. The 'horizontal' dimension is defined by the opposition between 'idealism' and 'realism', respectively 'the ideas that permeate the world' and 'what unfolds directly around the individual' (2014, 36). Referring to the interpretation of Plato's vision given above, it can be interpreted as the contrast between 'the fundamental elements of reality' and 'the sensory-material particulars' and thus comes close to the universal-particular opposition of the horizontal axis.

Slaughter (1998, 2002) suggested the application of *Wilber's* Integral Vision in studies of futures. Wilber's Vision is also presented as a scheme of four quadrants, which is defined by two axes (Wilber, 1995). The first axis describes the now well-known opposition between the individual and the 'communal' (collective). The second axis spans the contrast between inside (sensations, feelings, ideas, etc., p 113) and outside. The opposition between mind (spirit) and matter is not explicit in Wilber's scheme, but appears implicitly within the four quadrants (p 549). While valuable in its overall vision and intentions, Wilber's scheme deviates from the pattern of the human condition that has emerged from macro-history and the traditions described so far. For these general and more specific reasons, the now emerging pattern is preferred over Wilber's scheme.¹

1

- As indicated by Slaughter (1998), John Heron (in Collaborative Inquiry) wonders whether the elements of Wilber's scheme constitute a continuous 'smooth interpretative', given their origin from disparate sources. As a result, it would be impossible, among other things, to describe macro-history as a trajectory through the schema. Moreover, it will complicate "the unity of the virtues," which will be discussed below. In contrast, in our current study, the initial, empirical pattern was statistically obtained as a continuum of "measured" valuations. In this continuous field, the interrelationships between the virtues (and the vices) remain consistent.
- Wilber equates interior with subjective and exterior with objective. This is pretty close to the 'horizontal' axis of individual versus collective/universal, which could mean that both axes are interdependent. In that case a shift to the individual side at the same time implies an undesirable shift to the interior side (feelings, etc.).
- On the other hand, referring to Spinoza, among others, Wilber (p. 117) associates the interior with consciousness and the exterior with extension (matter). Thus, its "vertical" axis can be interpreted as consciousness versus matter, rather than mind versus matter. However, in the emergent pattern of the human condition that has been derived so far, consciousness is acquired through the integration (reconciliation) of all (one-sided) parts of the pattern. Partly as a result of this, the evolutionary/consciousness development in Wilber's scheme runs from the centre outwards, instead of from the periphery inwards, to the centre (1995, p. 127). As will be discussed below, this is at odds with psychological insights (Jung).
- Wilber reduces his four quadrants to (the Big) three, by combining the two exterior quadrants into an 'It' quadrant. He then relates the three quadrants 'I' (individual interior), 'We' (collective interior) and 'It' (exterior), respectively to the Greek notion of the Beautiful (subjective truth), the Good (intersubjective truth)

As an interim conclusion, the findings of metahistorical analysis and philosophy so far converge on a mutually confirmed conception of the human condition. This makes it possible to complete the pattern in which the four core qualities of the two axes are extended (interpolated) to twelve more specific qualities of the four quadrants, as shown in Figure 3, against the background of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. This pattern should be seen as a map of the potential valuations of the qualities/abilities of the human condition. The pattern needs to be further confirmed by findings from psychology, anthropology, and culture.

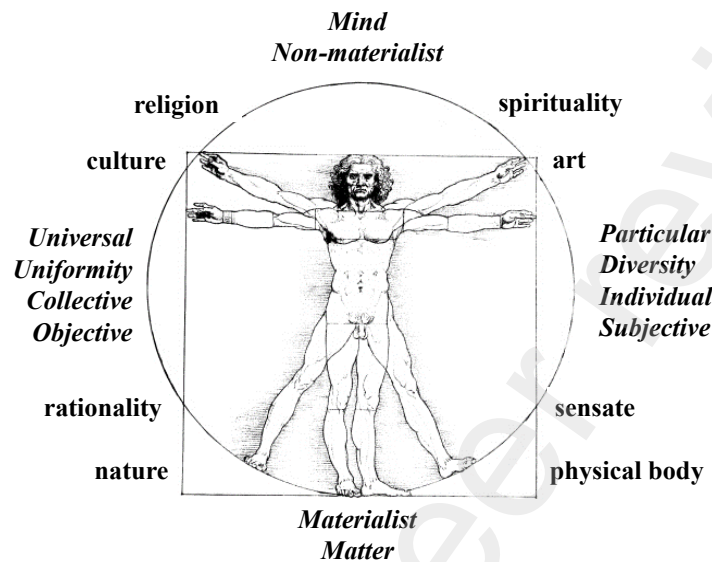


Figure 3 The human condition against the background of De Vinci's Vitruvian Man.

3.4 Psychology

Many authors have emphasized the importance of psychological insights in the discussion of human nature. *Hitlin* (2003) shows how personal identity, our sense of 'who we are', is produced by value obligations; we are the values we have. He also discusses the connection between the human 'self' and the appreciation of the human condition, which will be discussed below on the basis of Jung's work. *Swanton* (2003) believes that "it may well be true that virtuously satisfying the demands of the world, including those of our children, would coincide precisely with the pursuit and attainment of personal psychological perfection". Along the same lines, *Becker* (1998) argues that "it is no coincidence that the image of psychological health fits so well with the ordinary conception of moral character or virtue, while psychopathology correlates with vice". Indeed, as we have seen in meta-historical analysis, extreme orientations (outside the periphery of the circle) turn out to be problematic (psychopathological).

Psychologist *Carl Gustav Jung* explains this from the fact that individuals or societies in search of security tend to identify with the periphery (1961). But in the periphery, the values lose their coherence and become one-sided. This is in line with Jung's warning that "when separation is carried so far that the complementary opposite is lost sight of,, the result is one-sidedness, which is then compensated by the unconscious without our help" (Jung, 1953). The result will be a psychosis, an

and the True (objective truth). Thus, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful are related to individual quadrants. However, in the following translation to virtue ethics, which is presented below, all three of these fundamental qualities are related to the pattern of human nature as a whole, coinciding in its centre, as suggested in Greek philosophy.

obsessive preoccupation with very one-sided value orientations, which by definition have lost their connection with the core of the human value orientations (within the circle). As a result, human dignity is lost. In this way, we can read Jung's observations as a confirmation of the indicated historical observations. Value orientations outside the circle lead to a psychosis, which can be seen as the individual counterpart of social disruption (in-sustainability).

This means, according to Jung, that "the ego retains its integrity only if it does not identify with any of the opposites, and if it understands how to maintain the balance between them" (1954, p.129). This can only be done if it remains aware of both. By bridging the contradictions, consciousness inevitably spreads over the whole base (of the human condition) and the middle is experienced as self-awareness. Here, too, the opposites complement each other in a mutually reinforcing union. Earlier, Cusanus called it 'coincidence', while Jung speaks of 'conjunctio' (Jung, 1951). Against this background, Jung interprets the pattern of the human condition (Figure 3) as the representation of the human 'Self', whose integrity and internal coherence must be maintained and strengthened. It requires a restless balance of all kinds of contradictions. Jung studied the many drawings that people make when depicting their 'Self'. These circular patterns are known as "mandalas." The pattern of the human condition (as shown in Figure 3), including the horizontal and vertical axis, can be considered as such. It stands for the values we (can) have, and therefore 'who we are'. From these psychological findings, it must be concluded that the 'telos', the ultimate goal to achieve 'chance' or the reconciliation of the opposites at the centre of the human condition, is about increasing consciousness. This is congruent with the continual increase of consciousness in the evolutionary process. The subsequent increase in awareness is expected to be relevant on both an individual and societal level.

3.5 Anthropology

At the heart of anthropologist Plessner's work is "eccentric positionality" (1928). A living being that exhibits this (new) level of positionality is still bound to its animal nature, but separate from it, free from it. Life has its natural place like any animal existence, but at the same time it is disconnected from localism, is everywhere and nowhere (Green, 1966). To clarify this "eccentric positionality", Plessner first distinguishes between an outer world (nature) and the inner world (psyche; p 302). This implies that the individual must distinguish within himself between the individual and the "general" I. This implication, which is based on these two worlds, is 'eccentricity'. In addition to the inner and outer world, it forms a (third) "shared world" that is the form of man's own position, understood by him as the sphere of other people. Plessner considers this sphere, which is created and exists together with this eccentric positionality, as 'spirit', which is thus realized in the shared world.

3.6 Culture

Since the emerging pattern of the human condition (Figure 3) also includes the (vertical) dimension of aesthetic experience, it is not surprising that this pattern can be found in the great works of art and culture throughout the ages. In fact, Chappell (2013, 164) argues that the answers to questions of human happiness (eudaimonia) should be derived primarily from romantic novels, poems, and other individualistic works of art, rather than from rationalistic, universal science.

In European culture, not only many myths (Icarus), legends (King Arthur, Parzifal) and fairy tales (Cinderella), but also musical compositions (Mozart, Mendelssohn, Wagner) and many great works of literature (Shakespeare) can be understood in the light of the conception of human nature that has been derived so far. The most pronounced message conveyed by all of these cultural expressions is that people and society can only thrive by maintaining some sort of balance within the pattern of the human condition. To this end, the predominant value orientation must be shifted from the problematic or even catastrophic periphery to the centre of the human condition. As mythologist Joseph Campbell (1968) demonstrates, this search of man and society for the core of their own nature is the underlying, 'archetypal' story that is told over and over again in myths, legends and fairy tales. In the medieval epic of Parzifal (1210), for example, the hero leaves the periphery uncertain and still very weak. Only after

experiencing the many aspects (quadrants) of the human condition and resisting their caricatural temptations, is he able to attain the Grail fortress in the middle and the high level of consciousness that comes with it. More generally, the reconciliation of opposites implies the continuity or "sustainability" of the society in question. In Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* (Donnington, 1963), based on Scandinavian sagas, the centrifugal forces towards the periphery are too strong and Valhalla collapses, which means the loss of 'civilisation'. In contrast, in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954), compassion and "fellowship" amplify centripetal forces, allowing the middle ground to be reached and "Middle-earth" to be preserved.

A very pronounced exponent of the later (Northern) European Renaissance is *Shakespeare*. His 'centripetal' comedies and 'centrifugal' tragedies likewise refer to the common human search for reconciliation of opposites and thus for consciousness and freedom. This is confirmed by the explicit (but hidden) references in the frontispiece of the Shakespeare First Folio of 1623 to Da Vinci's drawing of the Vitruvian Man mentioned above (as shown in Figure 2).² By 'squaring the circle', micro- and macrocosm, mind and matter complement each other in the 'mean'. Here, the mean is the "golden mean" between two evils, or, more generally, the middle between the many one-sided evils outside the periphery of the circle. As derived from the Fibonacci-series, it further defines the spiral path to that middle.

3.7 Non-Western culture

As previously indicated, the human *condition* is invariant in time and space. Since the pattern of the human condition we presented is based on Western philosophy, culture and history, it can be described differently elsewhere in the world. However, there is evidence that the pattern of the human condition in Western and non-Western cultures such as Gross National Happiness (Bhutan), Ubuntu (South Africa) and Buen Vivir (South America) are to a large extent compatible with each other (van Norren 2017). The differences between cultures are mainly to be found in human *orientation*, which does vary in space and time. At first glance, then, it seems likely that the view of human nature developed so far is also relevant on a broader, global scale, reducing the concern for cultural relativism.

This concern is further alleviated by the work of Rutting et al (2024) in the field of scenario studies. They argue "that there is an underexposed aspect to the representation of various visions in scenario planning that relates to the deeper, sometimes self-evident futures in society, or imaginings". The examples given of the 'imaginaries' can be traced back to the specific (aspects of) worldviews as shown in Figure 3. They also refer to Buen Vivir and Ubuntu, which can be seen as the value orientations of the non-materialistic, local, and spiritual worldview at the top left.

4 Virtue Ethics

In search of a narrative based on a shared, common conception of human nature, we have so far studied the trajectory of (European) macro-history and uncovered recurring themes in philosophy, psychology and culture. Based on the resulting picture of human nature and the human condition, we have now arrived at a renewed ethical framework in the most natural way possible. As MacIntyre (1981, 259) suggested, we are thus "returning to the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, which can be reformulated in a way that restores the intelligibility and rationality of our moral and social attitudes and obligations."

4.1 The Aristotelian tradition

Aristotle defines ethical virtue "as a state midway between two other states, one with excess and the other with lack. It is a means because the vices in passions and deeds are greater or less than what is right, while virtue both finds and chooses what is intermediate" (Book II-6). Virtues and vices can be

² To be published; currently under peer review.

seen as tendencies to change the valuations of (the various items of) the human condition, and act accordingly. In 'geometric' analogy, they can be seen as 'vector forces' acting on the prevailing human orientation.

Since the human orientation is a valuation of the human condition, we can tentatively conclude that Aristotle's telos coincides with the centre of the human condition (Figure 2). The virtues, then, point to this centre, which corresponds to "the Good"; the vices point to (opposite sides of) the evil periphery. Thus, the mean, the centre of the circle, represents the final goal (telos), 'eudaimonia', which is associated with human happiness and flourishing.

As Aristotle points out, it is not easy to find the mean (Book II-9). The average is neither a simple average nor a fixed point on any measure. Indeed, *all* value orientations within the periphery of the circle can be judged as morally positive. Human freedom makes it possible to choose from many different, but still virtuous objectives. Aristotle recommends that "he who focuses on the intermediate must first depart from what is the more opposite." Aristotle thus suggests that these many one-sided, vicious shifts to the periphery are easier to identify than the precise position of the (virtuous) centre. So the telos is basically the avoidance of the catastrophic periphery. The ethical framework does not emerge from the telos in the centre, but from the periphery; the (experience of the) circle defines the centre and thus the telos, *not the other way around*. This has the undeniable advantage of being highly vindicated on the basis of the empirical analysis of historical, socio-dynamic behaviour with respect to the recurrent degeneration into caricature and catastrophe.

This view of the (Aristotelian) virtue ethical framework is also supported by the ethics of Spinoza, who stated (Nadler, 2006, 218): "I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we will say that men are more perfect or more imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model."

Hegel describes the ethical as "a true identity of the universal and the particular" (Wood, p. 209), which exists as a human self that grows through self-conflict by emerging from the conflict into a higher self-harmony (p. 2). Hegel's ethical theory, then, is a theory of self-realization. In it, the uncontrolled oscillations between and beyond the opposites are finally overcome. This would mean that the movement counterclockwise through the human condition becomes centripetal, resulting in a spiral motion that converges towards 'happiness'/eudaimonia. However, Hegel is very vocal that the best reason for one's behaviour to be guided by the idea of happiness is one that implicitly recognizes the priority of freedom over happiness as a human good (p 70). As we will see shortly with regard to human dignity, this can be understood from the fact that the human orientation can freely occupy any position within the human condition, not necessarily directly in the middle. The realization of that free choice is therefore constitutive of happiness. Hegel considers this to be essential, since he concludes that "the history of the world is nothing but the progress of the consciousness of freedom" (Hegel, 2001, p. 33).

4.2 The Good, the True and the Beautiful

As already implicitly indicated, the connection between proportion, aesthetics and ethics was a central theme of the Roman architect Vitruvius (around the beginning of our era), which was revived during the Renaissance. As indicated, Da Vinci expressed his vision in his drawing of the Vitruvian Man. The theme originates from Plato who presented it as the triad Proportion, Beauty and Truth, with Good as the overarching principle (Sutherland, 2011). Plato considers these three elements to be 'Forms' that can be seen as eternal essences or first principles. Proportion is an appropriate way in which the physical (finite) and the spiritual (infinite) can be brought together. It is the ratio in which the opposites are combined to give the intermediate 'average' position. In medieval scholasticism (Thomas Aquinas), Plato's triad was changed into its well-known shape of *the Good, the True, and the Beautiful*:

Beauty, both in nature and in artistic execution, can be seen as the experience of "immaterial" qualities in physical, sensory perception. It is the observation of the upper half of the human condition through the lower half. According to Schiller's 8th "Aesthetic Letter" (1793, 1994), this experience reconciles the vertical opposition between the spiritual and materialist qualities and thus places us between the two at the centre, while his 23rd letter outlines this process as enabling the moral condition, since morality cannot arise from a one-sided materialist orientation.

Finding the *Truth* is the goal of science. Especially in the so-called 'empirical cycle', truth comes to the surface through the interactive process on the horizontal axis. In the epistemological process, the individual observations on the right are brought under a universal theory on the left. Truth, then, arises as that which lies in the centre "between" certain perceptions and the universal theory. Thus, the pattern of the human condition also has an epistemological significance.

Thus, science (more specifically the scientific method) supports the integrity of the horizontal axis of the human condition, while art supports the integrity of the vertical axis. Once these basic human activities of science and art are lost, the human condition disintegrates, and with it, all ethical orientation is lost.

The *Good* thus combines, or 'oversees', the horizontal dimension of the true and the vertical dimension of the beautiful, and amounts to an all-encompassing centring of the human condition. In the direction of the centre, the coincidence of truth and beauty, or more generally, the coherence between the values of human nature, increases, and thus forms the "good," which reaches its maximum in the centre. The convergence of the good, the true and the beautiful reaffirms the veracity of the emerging human condition and the consequent virtue ethical scheme. The convergence in the centre confirms the human telos.

4.3 The unity of the virtues

Since the two-dimensional pattern of the human condition is initially statistically derived from 'measured' value orientations, the pattern is a continuum. This brings with it the important advantage of the ethical scheme, that we don't have to specify all the individual elements of the human condition. For example, when discussing "sustainability", it is not necessary to identify all the elements or "capabilities" that are considered prerequisites for sustainability (Sen et al., 1993; Claassen et al., 2013; Poli, 2015).

Approaching the human condition as a continuous two-dimensional pattern also implies maintaining Aristotle's initial assertion of the "unity of the virtues" in which one can have none of the virtues, without having them all (Toner, 2014; Aristotle, Book VI-13). Since a virtue is a centripetal shift from the valuations to the mean/centre of the continuous field of the human condition, this shift simultaneously brings about a consistent shift from all other valuations, thus into all other virtues. As a result, the virtues continue to form a coherent unity.

5 Moral practice

Moral practice follows straightaway from the virtue ethical scheme as presented by Figure 3. All orientations within the circle periphery, chosen in freedom, are morally positive. Orientations beyond the periphery are to be discouraged, as they tend to caricatural development, loss of human dignity and catastrophe.

5.1 Alternative Futures

Alternative futures can now be identified as those developments in which the respective value orientations at all levels of society have been concretely expressed. Given the previously observed macro-historical trends in dominant orientations, extrapolations to the future can be made. The counterclockwise movement in Figure 2 suggests a gradual shift to the upper right, 'romantic', still individualistic, 'local', but less materialistic orientation.

However, one-sidedness will provoke further centrifugal forces and a subsequent 'run-away' morality. In line with the pessimism of Slaughter (2020), the many alternative macro futures, as given by the four one-sided worldviews, thus are expected to degenerate into their respective "dystopian" caricatures that have become increasingly devastating throughout history. The only "morally preferred" future that remains, is the centripetal, "utopian" development based on the telos-driven integration of the four fundamental worldviews (quadrants).

5.2 Human dignity and democracy

In the only remaining 'preferred future', valuations of aspects of the human condition still can be made freely, as long as these values maintain a certain equilibrium (and thus coherence) within the circle boundary. Herein, the most pronounced centripetal force is 'love' as a positive relationship with one of the aspects or parts of the human condition (the other, oneself, art) in such a way that it simply cannot become an (isolated) obsession. In a social sense, it is expressed in compassion or respect for 'the other'. Love, in fact, is the central theme in many spiritual orientations (such as Christianity). Aristotle preferred the word 'friendship', while during the French Revolution there was talk of 'fraternity' (fraternité). Because it is oriented on the middle, it brings about the "good" insofar as it increases the coherence between valuations. This increasing coherence can be seen as '*human dignity*'; it is the sum of value orientations that fall within the circle of human orientation.

The preservation of human dignity requires intermediate positions of the predominant value orientations on the horizontal and vertical axes. With regard to the horizontal axis, this implies, following Jung, "an understanding of maintaining the balance between the collective and the individual, by remaining aware of both". This is also the definition of *democracy*. As soon as the balance, and the 'consciousness of both' is lost, democracy is lost and unilateral domination on the collective side results in (state) autocracy, in theocracy (upper left quadrant) or corporatocracy (lower left). One-sided domination of the individual side leads to anarchy. Both derailments call into question the sustainability of the social system.

5.3 Sustainability; future generations

Thus, permanence implies maintaining the orientations within the circle boundary, avoiding the catastrophic discontinuities of the periphery. In the original Brundtland definition of sustainability (1987), current generations are expected to meet their current needs, without compromising the needs of future generations. Since then, policymakers have taken the easy way out, stating that we can't know the needs of future generations. However, this argument is untenable, as the human condition is time-independent; only the value orientations change over time. Thus, future needs are well known and follow from the human condition that does not change over time. Thus, sustainability requires the same, well-defined virtuous behaviour from both current and future generations.

6 Applications; the economic system

Finally, in order to demonstrate its concrete applicability, we briefly mention some exemplary but relevant further implications of the resulting moral framework for our current position. The guiding idea is that in a virtuous society, value orientations are freely chosen, as long as they remain within the coherent confines of the human condition, while societal goals are preferably focused on its centre. Examples of applications are the current ecological crisis and the claims on the one and absolute truth. As the financial-economic system is the caricature of our now dominant (lower right) value orientation, we extend the human condition to include the economic condition as an example of the applicability of the moral scheme. The resulting diagram is shown in Figure 4.

It is not surprising that the structure of economic goods corresponds to a large extent to the structure of the human condition. The vertical opposition between the materialist and the non-materialist properties parallels the economic difference between rival and non-rival goods. Non-material goods, such as culture, insights, or information, are non-rival because they do not run out with higher consumption, unlike most physical-material goods. The horizontal opposition between individual and

collective runs parallel to the categories of exclusive (public) versus non-exclusive (private) goods. Individualism tends to make goods exclusive, often through appropriation.

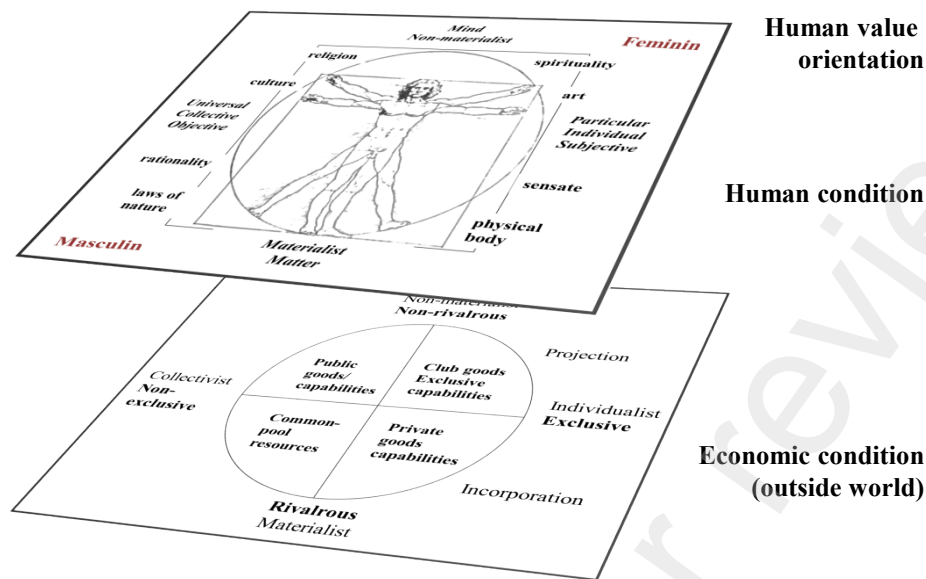


Figure 4 : The human condition and the associated economic condition of the outside world.

The combination of the two axes yields the four basic categories (quadrants) of economic goods:

- *Private goods and property* such as housing (shelter), clothing and telephones;
- *Common goods* such as nature reserves, drinking water, fresh air, etc.;
- *Public goods* such as cultural heritage, intellectual/scientific insights (the Pythagorean theorem);
- *Club goods* , e.g. intellectual property.

In our virtue ethics framework, the 'good' is associated with the area within the circle boundary (or boundary line), in which all the values of the human condition still form a coherent whole. The most virtuous position is in the centre (telos). This must also apply to the economic condition, which is a predeterminant of the human condition and orientation.

The moral framework thus calls for a delicate *balance between the public and the private*. This is mainly reflected in the appropriation of economic goods (resources). Instead of the extreme collectivist (communist) orientation, in which nothing was for sale, or the current extreme neoliberal situation, in which everything is for sale, the extent to which economic goods can be appropriated must be limited by the boundaries and relationships as shown in Figure 3. This implies a fundamental balance between private and public goods or public 'commons', which are therefore not 'for sale'.³ Thus, one of the ultimate moral implications of the accepted pattern of human nature can be seen in the social-democratic (Rhineland) model, in which this public-private balance is the moral middle ground between the immoral extremes we have mostly seen so far. It is the only remaining viable future.

³ Further alignment of the public-private ownership balance is feasible; Munzer, S.R. (1990) A Theory of Property. Cambridge University Press.

7 Conclusion: a renewed narrative

In conclusion, we can now propose the narrative of the remaining 'preferred future', in which we redefine our understanding of the values of progress:

1. Throughout the history of Western civilisation, there has been a widely shared, common understanding of our 'human nature', of 'what it means to be human'. This concept derives empirically from history itself, from many scientific insights in philosophy, psychology and sociology, but also from the great works of art and culture. According to that mutually affirmed perception of human nature, we are "citizens of four worlds." We are essentially both an individual self and a member of a larger collective community. At the same time, we are part of both the materialistic, physical world and the non-materialistic (spiritual) world. It implies an ethical notion and a moral framework, in which the awareness of our overarching (fifth) essence, allows us to maintain a certain balance between the four basic qualities and thus remain civilized.
2. The Western world must acknowledge that it has often failed to maintain that balance. Value orientations were often exaggerated into one-sided caricatures that ended in catastrophes, after which human dignity was lost. The exaggeration of religious values led to the Inquisition and religious wars. Scientific advances (during the Enlightenment) were used to exploit colonies on other continents. Exaggerated, obsessive materialism caused the ecological crisis. Our current one-sided individualism destabilizes the real economy, widens the gap between rich and poor, and frustrates sustainability. It was not until the Renaissance of the 16th century that we managed to maintain the balance that progress brought about in all areas of society, thanks in part to the inherently coherent moral framework that it established.
3. Having become aware of the dramatic consequences of our unconscious historical wanderings through our own human nature, let us resume our former resolutions to maintain balance. To this end, the moral framework is restored on the basis of that shared common understanding of human nature. The framework makes it possible to make a practical distinction between virtues, which increase coherence in human nature and thus human dignity, and the vices, which fragment human nature into isolated value orientations obsessively pursued. These fragmenting, centrifugal forces can legitimately be discouraged over time through concrete (ultimately constitutional) policies. Conversely, the 'good' can be encouraged, as it is defined by the central part of the human condition, where freedom, consciousness and 'sustainability' are maximised. "Progress" must thus be understood as the enhancement of this urgently needed awareness and the consequent full awareness of our human nature and identity.
4. The most pronounced symbol of the new narrative is Da Vinci's drawing of the Vitruvian Man (as shown in Figures 2 and 3). It depicts the widely shared (at least European) view of our human nature and its ethical implications. It also makes understandable the various suggestions to return to the philosophical orientation of the Renaissance. The story for the next Renaissance is inevitably close to the story of the previous Renaissance. To quote Hankins (2007); "The philosophy of the Renaissance offers many parallels with the philosophy of our own time. In our time, too, we have seen the rupture and crisis of authoritarian traditions, a new pluralism of philosophical perspectives, and a disturbing information revolution. It's the insight that comes from looking in a mirror."

Given that the successive (overshoot and collapse) catastrophes in history have become ever greater, the key question remains whether this new narrative, and the increasing awareness it promises, will become political practice before a return from the destructive periphery becomes definitively impossible. Only in that case can 'Middle-earth' be preserved.

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