

# SUSTAINABLE SUSTAINABILITY: ENDURING ETHICAL ENVIRONMENTAL ENGAGEMENT

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## INTRODUCTION: AN ETHICS OF NOT-I

The “wicked problems” and “adaptive challenges” of today’s world – pollution, impoverishment, displacement – require an engagement and effort from everyone, not just the intellectual and industrial elites.<sup>1</sup> Every individual person has the duty (and usually the possibility) to evaluate critically her own attitudes and actions and see where she might fail to fulfill moral and spiritual obligations towards others.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, however, nobody should stand alone and nobody should be left alone. Support and encouragement for contributing to the greater good can naturally be found in close circles and caring communities, but also in the many inspirational stories from the Christian intellectual tradition which connect good habits and good behaviors with creation, natural law, and redemption.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I want to reflect further

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an expanded version of Krijn Pansters, “Duurzaam duurzaam: Ecologie als ethiek,” in *Duurzame duurzaamheid: Ecologische bekering en betrokkenheid*, ed. Krijn Pansters (Utrecht: Eburon, 2020), 15-29.

<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the ruthless market mentality of employees of firms such as the “experience management company” Qualtrics, which develops software for “breakthroughs that turn customers into fanatics, products into obsessions, employees into ambassadors, and brands into religions,” <https://www.qualtrics.com>. Arguing against the effectiveness of an “individualization of responsibility” (which summarizes my position in this paper) is, among others, Michael F. Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?,” *Global Environmental Politics* 1 (2001): 31-52. I do not disagree with him, however, that “dealing with these topics demands a practiced capacity to talk about power, privilege, prosperity, and larger possibilities” (47).

<sup>3</sup> See for example John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary R. Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment & Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Daniel P. Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). On ecological ethics and

on environmental engagement *as ethical concern*, namely, as a matter of good and bad behavior toward the environment and other creatures. First, I will deal with three ethical methods suggested by the literature: contemplation, action, and reflection. These three moral modes will be illustrated with examples from the present-day philosophical discussion. Next, I will dive deeper into the matter of environmental engagement *as a problem of endurance*, and more concretely of consolidating ethical conduct and thus of making environmental habits and behaviors in today's society sustainable themselves. In doing so, I will address three ethical requirements central to the debate: commitment, competence, and conversion. These three moral elements will be illustrated with examples from the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual tradition.

With my discussion, within this particular ethical framework, of the divine-human relationship – which may be called the essence of spirituality as life's direction and orientation – I enter a theoretical problem area. The good of God, Creator of heaven and earth, has more or less disappeared from the scene in contemporary social discourse. What might still be self-evident for sustainability, however, is the value of a transcendental perspective or philosophical position from which everyone, as if “returning every good to the Lord God” (Francis of Assisi), focuses on an a priori, alternativeless totality that “fills the firmament.”<sup>4</sup> Such a holistic point of departure or higher point of reference will be of the greatest benefit for all, as we become radically subservient – concerned beyond particular goals and private gains – to that which precedes and connects all without exception. If environmental ethics wants to be *an ethics of not-I*,<sup>5</sup> it should be concerned with my, your, and her own way of total commitment to the common good.<sup>6</sup>

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storytelling, see Brian Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Krijn Pansters, *Spirituele ethiek: Franciscaanse perspectieven* (Damon: Eindhoven, 2017), 100. An ethics of not-I (“een ethiek van niet-ik”) is weaved with ten threads: source, relation, duty, desire, attitude, action, power, competence, integrity, and infinity (100-108).

<sup>6</sup> See for a Catholic Social Teaching perspective: Ian Christie, Richard M. Gunto and Adam P. Hejnowicz, “Sustainability and the Common Good: Catholic Social Teaching and ‘Integral Ecology’ as Contributions to a Framework of Social Values for Sustainability Transitions,” *Sustainability Science* 14 (2019): 1343-1354.

### ETHICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM: CONTEMPLATION, ACTION, REFLECTION

I will start with the question: what makes environmental engagement ethical?<sup>7</sup> First of all, the aspect of contemplation. The American scholar of religion Lisa Sideris in her book *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge and the Natural World* (2017) deals with wonder – astonishment and awe – and the direct experience of the mystery of nature as opposed to science and rational control over the natural world.<sup>8</sup> She argues that in our relation with nature not humans (anthropocentrism) but nature itself (ecocentrism) should be the center of attention. Whereas feelings of connectedness with nature can lead to an ethics of respect, the human-centered search for explanations ultimately leads to hubris and indifference. Contemplative directedness and direct perception should therefore take the place of cognitive control and solution-focused thinking. The universe, which does not allow itself to be caught in compartments and schemes, wants to be admired:

At times the contrasts that engender puzzlement and reflection may be those of scale, as when we contemplate the existence of a micro-world of cells or molecules alongside deep-space images captured by the Hubble telescope. For those not driven by temperament or training to locate or impose total unity, order, and coherence, wonder may be a response to living in a universe that exhibits an incommensurable play of scales and a perplexing array of possible meanings.<sup>9</sup>

When we dwell in wonder, this activity yields many good things:

And yet, when viewed within the context of ethics, particularly environmental ethics, dwelling in wonder has distinctly virtuous

<sup>7</sup> Publications on ecological ethics are numerous, but form only a fraction of the total literature on sustainability and environmentalism. Some recent examples: Joseph R. Des Jardins, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2013<sup>5</sup>); Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); David R. Keller, *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017). Important for Sideris is the work of Rachel Carson, notably *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 174. Furthermore: “[...] an invitation to lose oneself in humble contemplation of what is infinitely vast, complex and beyond mastery” (167).

dimensions. This is because wonder shows affinities with a cluster of welcome dispositions that include compassion, generosity, vulnerability, openness, empathy and respect for otherness, and – most significantly – humility.<sup>10</sup>

To the contemplative attitude toward nature, an attitude that has traded the search for security for affective experience, furthermore belong attention for small and special things, a relaxed receptivity for the unexpected, space for joy and celebration, non-anthropocentric reverence and appreciation, and other forms of feeling and not-knowing.<sup>11</sup> All these add to a deep ethical commitment.

Second, the aspect of action. The American philosopher Roger Gottlieb in his book *Morality and the Environmental Crisis* (2019) examines the present-day tension between the difficulty of living a moral life on the one hand and the duty of an unswerving ethical commitment on the other.<sup>12</sup> He therefore asks the question “how to be a good person when our collective and individual actions contribute to immeasurable devastation and suffering.” His answer to this difficult question lies in linking today’s environmental crisis to moral remedies by pointing to the value of nature, the spirit of ecological democracy, the rationale of animal rights, the importance of limits and virtues, the role of guilt and responsibility, the imperative of political actions for a better world, the nature of rationality, and the meaning of hope. Gottlieb’s seventh chapter, on changing the world, thereby offers “a moral primer on environmental political activism.” Even amidst the greatest insecurity with regard to what might be the most important issues or the best strategies, one can just take action:

In the end, I suspect, virtually every environmental issue is connected, however tenuously, to every other one. If you are undecided between global warming, species loss, pesticides in food, lead in drinking water, factory farming, or the threat of reckless

<sup>10</sup> Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 172.

<sup>11</sup> On ecology and contemplation, see furthermore Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Marie Eaton et al., eds., *Contemplative Approaches to Sustainability in Higher Education: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection: Suffering and Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). On ignorance in relation to sustainability, see Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson, eds., *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Roger S. Gottlieb, *Morality and the Environmental Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

genetic engineering – don't worry, they all reflect the same fundamental problems. In every case we have the socially powerful, the cultural distortions of political passivity, consumerism, and techno-coma, the nonhuman species and disadvantaged human groups being afflicted. So, in the words of Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace prize laureate Elie Wiesel: 'Where should you start? Start anywhere.' Someplace about which you care, for which you are willing to study, work, and join with others so that the effects of your labors can be magnified. As moral beings, that's the best we can do.<sup>13</sup>

The interesting thing about Gottlieb's book is that all other chapters serve this political activism.<sup>14</sup> For example, the "spiritual virtues" that he recommends – self-awareness, acceptance, gratitude, compassion, and love – can be "enormously helpful in political life."<sup>15</sup> Positive and praiseworthy is that the scholar Gottlieb is very honest with his readers about his own political commitment: "[...] I personally support the most extreme of the aforementioned goals," namely a challenge to the economic, political, and cultural system<sup>16</sup>; "While my own sympathies lie with the radical approach," namely exchanging capitalism and addictive consumerism for a "truly democratic environmentally oriented socialism"<sup>17</sup>; and so on.<sup>18</sup> Politically and personally motivated as it should

<sup>13</sup> Gottlieb, *Morality*, 188-189.

<sup>14</sup> Other forms of activism are technological, economic or ecological (regarding the ecosystem). One of the places where sustainability becomes most visible in the Netherlands is the "Nationaal Sustainability Congres" (NSC). This annual conference is being held since 2000. When one studies the annual programs (if one can find them), one finds that attention to ethics is minimal – a missed opportunity. See "Nationaal Sustainability Congres," <https://www.sustainability-congres.nl>.

<sup>15</sup> Gottlieb, *Morality*, 134, 186. On environmental virtues, see also Steven Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2020); Ronald L. Sandler, *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro, eds., *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). A recent publication, Heesoon Bai et al., eds., *A Book of Ecological Virtues: Living Well in the Anthropocene* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), states that "it is vitally important that we turn towards the cultivation of eco-virtues, a new set of values by which to live, if there is to be hope for us and other species to continue."

<sup>16</sup> Gottlieb, *Morality*, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Gottlieb, *Morality*, 177.

<sup>18</sup> On ecology and action, see also Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Andres R. Edwards, *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers,

be, sustainability has everything to do with individual and collective awareness, attitude, and action.

Third, the aspect of reflection. The American philosopher Ronald Sandler in his introductory textbook *Environmental Ethics: Theory in Practice* (2017) offers an overview of the various approaches to environmental ethics with the aim of helping students “develop the analytical skills to effectively identify and evaluate the social and ethical dimensions of environmental issues.”<sup>19</sup> Environmental ethics concerns itself with the social, cultural, and attitudinal dimensions of environmental problems and with determining one’s own position in the debate.<sup>20</sup> Individual preferences for particular ethical theories, moral goods or ecological values in the end have the greatest repercussions on practical decision-making.<sup>21</sup>

Theories of environmental ethics aim to provide guidance on how we ought to address environmental issues by identifying the full range of environmental goods and values at stake and articulating how we ought to respond to them. Different theories support different approaches to environmental decision-making. They thereby have different implications for which policies and practices we ought to adopt. If the primary thing we should care about is human welfare and the goal is to maximally satisfy human preferences, then the practical implications for everything from species conservation to what we should eat are different than if we should care about all living things and the goal is to protect the flourishing of diverse life forms. This is why determining which theories of environmental ethics are well justified and which are not has such practical importance.<sup>22</sup>

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2005); Wilhelm Schmid, *Ökologische Lebenskunst. Was jeder Einzelne für das Leben auf dem Planeten tun kann*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 4034 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Sandler, *Environmental Ethics: Theory in Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> On ecology and reflection, see also Marion Hourdequin, *Environmental Ethics: From Theory to Practice* (London, etc.: Bloomsbury, 2015); Paul Pojman et al., eds., *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2017); David Schmidtz and Dan C. Shaha, *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019<sup>3</sup>).

<sup>21</sup> A central question might be whether we should teach and encourage our students to reflect, to go outside into nature, and/or go out to protest against insufficient action to address the climate crisis.

<sup>22</sup> Sandler, *Environmental Ethics*, xix.

Whichever subject Sandler deals with – the essence and methods of environmental ethics, the normativity and value of nature, anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric approaches, normative theories (consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics), ecocentrism and deep ecology, ecofeminism and environmental justice, and so on – personal understanding and critical questioning always come first. In addition, every chapter ends with review and discussion questions, a number of which are very suitable for our own treatment of environmental engagement as a problem of conduct and morals: “Is the argument presented in this chapter that religious ethics and reason-based ethics ought to converge sound?”<sup>23</sup>; “Do you agree that people’s environmental responsibilities will be much stronger if nature, or some part of it, possesses final value, particularly objective final value? Why or why not?”<sup>24</sup>; “Do you find the consequentialist or the deontological conception of ethics to be more compelling?”<sup>25</sup>; “What character traits do you believe are particularly vital environmental virtues?”<sup>26</sup>; “Do you think that the virtue ethics approach to decision-making is sufficient for providing action guidance?”<sup>27</sup>; and so forth. Environmental ethics starts with a reflection on where one stands and, consequently, what one should do.

Today’s sustainability debate, which often speaks about Sustainable Development Goals, “People, Planet, Prosperity,” or the warming of the earth, should perhaps give more attention to environmental engagement as an ethical practice. This could be done not only in terms of fruitful ethical action beyond irresponsible behavior and social indifference, but also as an answer to the question how sustainability itself can become sustainable, viz., anchored in people’s attitudes and actions.<sup>28</sup> One possible angle of approach, or strategy, is concerned with the development of a *contemplative*, non-controlling orientation toward nature. What I often

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<sup>23</sup> Sandler, *Environmental Ethics*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Sandler, *Environmental Ethics*, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Sandler, *Environmental Ethics*, 221.

<sup>26</sup> Sandler, *Environmental Ethics*, 239.

<sup>27</sup> Sandler, *Environmental Ethics*, 239.

<sup>28</sup> This requires looking forward to the future and looking backward to the individual (see Attfield, *Environmental Ethics*, 27: “Ecosystems and species can instead be seen as matrices within which intrinsically valuable individuals emerge”). It also requires the personal awareness that not all problems are solvable. See for example Pema Chödrön, *Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2015), 85-87: “It was a bipartisan climate change report that said three main things: One, climate change is really happening (for the doubters). Two, there are certain things that we can do to help it not get worse. Three, there are some things that are not fixable. You are entering into a world where there are a lot of things that aren’t fixable.”

miss in the ecocentric literature and in the nature-oriented concepts that often promote such a contemplative strategy is the integration of a positive and interiorized anthropocentrism, of an anthropocentrism that draws human beings into a contemplative space within themselves where directions for good behavior action can be perceived.<sup>29</sup> Another angle of approach relates to an *active* disposition with which human beings commit themselves to worthy causes and to concrete efforts for the benefit of a better world. In my opinion, the action-oriented literature sometimes does not pay enough attention to the nature of the human *habitus* itself and of the inner habitat of people that is not only the provenance of actions but also the product of deeply personal ideas and ideologies.<sup>30</sup> A third angle of approach accentuates a *reflective* awareness of environmental issues in theory and practice, undoubtedly on the supposition that reflection supports the learning process and thus means progression. Here, there is a real risk of producing analyses, evaluations, and argumentations that ignore the thinking and feeling self itself, and thus the practice of self-reflection as the starting point or core procedure of all reflections on good practices.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Sideris discusses the necessity of a “sensory engagement” and a “loss of self” (Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 8, 27). I miss here an awareness of the usefulness of the inner senses and the finding of the self. See also Marie Eaton et al., “Why Sustainability Education Needs Pedagogies of Reflection and Contemplation,” [https://serc.carleton.edu/bioregion/sustain\\_contemp\\_lc/essays/51469.html](https://serc.carleton.edu/bioregion/sustain_contemp_lc/essays/51469.html); Christine Wamsler et al., “Mindfulness in Sustainability Science, Practice, and Teaching,” *Sustainability Science* 13 (2018): 143-162. Unlike Sideris, these authors indeed discuss “sustainability from within.”

<sup>30</sup> Gottlieb also mentions intelligence, intention, attention, and attitude (Gottlieb, *Morality*, 74, 169), but does not address them sufficiently. See also Krijn Pansters, “The Choice of De-Ownership and the Ownership of Virtue: A Franciscan Perspective,” in *The Quest for Quality of Life*, ed. Elisabeth Hense et al. (Münster: Aschendorff, 2017), 97-119; Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (s.l.: Random House, 2018), esp. 364: “Perhaps our environmental problems are not best construed technically. Maybe they’re best considered psychologically. The more people sort themselves out, the more responsibility they will take for the world around them and the more problems they will solve. It is better, proverbially, to rule your own spirit than to rule a city. It’s easier to subdue an enemy without than one within. Maybe the environmental problem is ultimately spiritual. If we put ourselves in order, perhaps we will do the same for the world.” See also Lisa H. Newton, who, following deep ecologist Arne Naess, speaks about interior and exterior dimensions of cleaning (*Ethics and Sustainability: Sustainable Development and the Moral Life* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003), 42).

<sup>31</sup> Apart from the many publications on spiritual awareness, see also Nathalie van der Borgt and Marco Oteman, *De essentie van duurzaamheid: Gedrag én bewustzijn* (Utrecht: Samenwerkende Uitgevers, 2011); Susan M. Koger and Deborah DuNann Winter, *The Psychology of Environmental Problems* (Mahwah and London: Psychology Press, 2010<sup>3</sup>); Steve Schein, *A New Psychology for Sustainability Leadership: The Hidden Power of Ecological Worldviews* (London: Routledge, 2017).



### ENDURING ENVIRONMENTALISM: COMMITMENT, COMPETENCE, CONVERSION

Let us move on to the second question: what makes environmental engagement enduring?<sup>32</sup> First of all, the aspect of commitment. The American scholar of religion and Franciscan sister Dawn Nothwehr in her volume *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader* (2002) brings together over twenty articles on Franciscan ecology.<sup>33</sup> This very inspirational – and at times adoration – book consists of five parts: “Scripture: Creation and the Word,” “Saint Francis and Saint Clare: Foundations,” “Saint Bonaventure: Cosmic Christ,” “Blessed John Duns Scotus: Cosmic Mutuality,” and “Franciscan Praxis: Peace Justice and the Integrity of Creation.” At the end of every part is a list of questions and literature for further reflection and implementation. In her introduction, Nothwehr describes the relation between ecology, theology, and spirituality and she discusses, among other things, the theological, bonaventurian “return to cosmology” as “a fully inclusive turn to the heavens and the earth.” She thereby draws attention to three areas (cosmic mysticism, the cosmic Christ, cosmic mutuality) and especially to the “theological method” of Francis of Assisi (penance, poverty, prayer) next to the “foundational intuitions” of Franciscan theology (goodness of the world, humanity of Christ, fragility of people).

By explaining these areas and aspects, Nothwehr aims to underscore the “transformative potential” of mystical cosmology as opposed to the deformative potential of modern economy:

The modern economy operates on the presumption of scarcity (often artificially created) rather than abundance. It refuses to recognize the wholeness of any one place (or the Earth itself) and the internal harmonies that sustain it, but rather views all things and beings as separate parts to be assembled interchangeably at

<sup>32</sup> There are almost no publications on making sustainability strategies and “capacities for long-term engagement and resilience” (Eaton et al., *Contemplative Approaches*, xvii) themselves sustainable, namely: permanently anchored in people’s behavior (see below).

<sup>33</sup> Dawn M. Nothwehr, ed., *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader* (Quincy: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2002). On Franciscan ecology, see also Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic. The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Ilia Delio et al., *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2009); Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes Toward the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

will and for the benefit of some. Unlike Francis, who through doing penance knew the authentic reality of sin and finitude but also understood God's largeness and the goodness of the world, the modern economy views limits as negative and restrictive to maximizing profit. Such an attitude is increasingly being proven a false perception of reality. As Guy Beney has shown, it is no longer possible to flee to yet another place to escape the closed nature that is our oikos (earth-home). The long pattern of neglecting limits and not respecting the cyclical patterns through which the natural world renews itself is reaching its breaking point. We now find our world in a condition of ecological crisis and vulnerability. We have violated the goodness of God and the integrity of creation which required that we recognize each member as having intrinsic value and thus, moral status.<sup>34</sup>

For the sake of the well-being of the world we have to make, in the words of Nothwehr, "a radical turn to the Earth" that implies that we "take seriously the foundational moral experience that Francis knew so well – reverence for persons and their environment." Here, environmental engagement becomes a form of admiration and appreciation that is clearly founded on ethical insight and involvement.

Second, the aspect of competence. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015) gives his interpretation of the current ecological crisis and offers a range of social and spiritual solutions to end it.<sup>35</sup> He reflects on "what is happening to our common home" and pleads for an "integral ecology" on the basis of "the gospel of creation." An integral ecology emphasizes the connectedness of everything (environmental, economic, social, cultural) and serves the principle of the common good and justice between the generations. In this inspirational document, which starts with a line from the *Canticle of the Creatures*, Pope Francis mentions Saint Francis for his "ecological" exemplarity:<sup>36</sup>

I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work

<sup>34</sup> Dawn M. Nothwehr, "Cosmic Mysticism, Cosmic Christ, Cosmic Mutuality," in *Franciscan Theology*, xix-xxxvi (xxviii).

<sup>35</sup> See also Pansters, *Spirituele ethiek*, 97-98.

<sup>36</sup> On Franciscan exemplarity, see also Krijn Pansters, "Imitatio imitationis: In the Footsteps of the Imitation of Christ in Early Franciscan Texts," in *Schaffen und Nachahmen. Kreative Prozesse im Mittelalter*, ed. Volker Leppin, Das Mittelalter, Beihefte 16 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 373-389.

in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.<sup>37</sup>

Here, a layered relationship resounds between the saint and the vulnerable, the Christian and the non-Christian, the lover and the beloved, and God, community, creation, and soul. The Pope's representation also reflects the Saint's provocative power (paraenesis).

Much has been written and will be written about this important letter, but not many interpreters have looked at its central issue of care for our common home from a virtue ethical perspective: "Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment" (211). Of course, Pope Francis accentuates the theological virtues (faith, hope, love): "[...] how faith brings new incentives and requirements with regard to the world of which we are a part" (17); "Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems" (61); "I wish to insist that love always proves more powerful" (149), etc. Connected to these supernatural virtues are other, mostly biblical and Franciscan, virtues, like joy, peace, humility, and gratitude. What makes this document extra powerful, however, is the call to cultivate the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, courage): "Developing the created world in a prudent way is the best way of caring for it" (124); "[A true ecological approach] must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (33); "The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis" (11); "As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions" (59), etc. Boldness or bravery, the strength to "choose again what is good" and to be open to it, may indeed be the most encouraging virtue of the whole encyclical – a curriculum for competent, courageous living:

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<sup>37</sup> *Encyclical Letter Laudato si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home*, 10, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/pa-pa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/pa-pa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). On Franciscan care, see also Krijn Pansters, "Care as Contemplation / Contemplation as Care in the Clarissan Tradition," in *Festschrift Rob Faesen*, ed. John Arblaster (Louvain 2023), forthcoming.

Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts.<sup>38</sup>

Central for the Pope are this personal capability (to rise, to choose) and personal ability (to acknowledge, to respond) in the face of difficulty, in short: this moral competence.

Third, the aspect of conversion. Francis of Assisi in his *Testament* (1226) recounts his own conversion as follows:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.<sup>39</sup>

The sources and stories of his life indicate that he actually remained in the world, but with a radically altered view on society and the things of this world. They also show that Francis' total transformation was actually a procession of events that turned his world upside down but that gave direction to his search and that constituted different stages in his discernment process.<sup>40</sup> These stages included periods of sickness and recovery, dreams about a glorious future, times of separation from the world in seclusion, caring activities for lepers, public acts of renunciation, and divine revelations. Valuable and relevant does this renowned case of conversion remain for its spiritual and moral implications: Francis, lover of the world, became a servant of God and of fellow creatures, in particular the most vulnerable ones.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, 205.

<sup>39</sup> *Testament* 1-3.

<sup>40</sup> See Pierre Brunette, *Francis of Assisi and His Conversions*, trans. Paul Lachance and Kathryn Krug (Quincy: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> Another instance of conversion in Francis' life, now an active one, is also spiritually and morally significant: "In the thirteenth year of his conversion he traveled to the region of Syria, hurrying to the Sultan. Assaulted and beaten he preached Christ; and was

Conversion remained a key moment and a key instrument in the lives of the early brothers and sisters (as well as in Christian-Muslim encounters). Their spiritual program, based on Francis' call to the virtues of charity, obedience, goodness, truth, faith, humility, joy, poverty, penance, and peace, had a tremendous social impact.<sup>42</sup> The power of the Franciscan enterprise, one of the largest conversional enterprises in our history, was a unique combination of psychological search and social strive for spiritual renewal. In the light of Franciscan inspired theory and practice today, David Couturier developed a model of metanoia consisting of four mutually enriching phases – personal, interpersonal, ecclesial, and structural – of psychological and social renewal.<sup>43</sup> The first phase requires a determination to orient one's own life toward the good through virtuous habits and acts, the second phase an embodiment of giving and receiving love, the third phase an awareness of being received into a loving community, and the fourth phase a witnessing of the "ontological priority" of peace and compassion.<sup>44</sup> Whereas each of these phases of "spiritual transformation" is characterized by the consequent transcendence of a self-defined and self-created self, a transcendence that ultimately perfects the personal conversion process, the interpersonal, ecclesiastical, and structural conversions are altogether impossible without a preceding personal conversion.

A broad reflection on moral conversion is essential to address the moral crises of our times and to move present discussions on ethical behavior and concern for the common good forward.<sup>45</sup> Discussions have focused too much on moral goods and the strategies to realize them, and not enough on transformation processes that revolve around the personal experience of a decisive new beginning, on subjections of moral

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sent back by the infidels to the camp of the faithful" (LCh 2,8). His visit to the sultan in 1219 was a way of converting an "enemy" to the true faith and of showing how that is possible without weapons.

<sup>42</sup> On these Franciscan virtues, see Krijn Pansters, *Franciscan Virtue: Spiritual Growth and the Virtues in Franciscan Literature and Instruction of the Thirteenth Century*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 161 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> David B. Couturier, *The Four Conversions: A Spirituality of Transformation* (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2016). Pope Francis discusses the need of an "ecological conversion" (*Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, 216-221).

<sup>44</sup> Couturier, *The Four Conversions*, 19 (determination); 82 (embodiment); 114 (realization); 171 (witness).

<sup>45</sup> On a new Franciscan model of "conversional ethics," see Krijn Pansters, "Franciscan Conversion: Turning Toward the Truly Good," *Franciscan Studies* 78 (2021): 1-23; Krijn Pansters, "Communicating Conversion: Moral Turn Transmission in the Franciscan Tradition," in *Teaching and Tradition*, eds. Jos Moons et al. (2023), forthcoming.

self and identity to profound change, and on turns away from the bad toward the good.<sup>46</sup> It is remarkable to see how many in the world turn to political solutions and ethical strategies that to a greater or lesser extent deal with the lack of morality and justice, but not with the lack of radical reorientation toward the good and the right that is the root of the basic problem.<sup>47</sup> How do people “change the criterion of their decisions and choices from satisfactions to values”<sup>48</sup> and how are these moral (as opposed to religious or intellectual) conversions sustained in new lifestyles? With this fresh conversional foundation, the environmental focus will move from austerity as a “mere veneer of asceticism”<sup>49</sup> to austerity as a sign of prosperity, and thus from material impoverishment to spiritual enrichment: with connections, with virtues, and with values. I am reminded here specifically of Thomas Merton’s “simplicity and sincerity”<sup>50</sup> – a set of vital, rewarding virtues at the crossroads of politics and spirituality, of economy and morality. Sobriety *pur sang* may be more applicable to the whole business of sustainability itself, insofar as it not supporting personal commitments, competences, and conversions.<sup>51</sup> The moment you start to be ethically – contemplatively, actively, reflectively – engaged, the world becomes a bit more sustainably sustainable. This, however, requires an audacious anthropocentrism.

### CONCLUSION: SUSTAINABILITY PERMANENTLY ANCHORED IN PEOPLE’S BEHAVIOR

Francis of Assisi declared that we should “return everything to the Lord,” so that material possessions and human imperfections would no

<sup>46</sup> According to the formula: “turning about = turning within + turning toward.” In my current research on moral conversion, I develop a method based on a matrix of eight core components of conversion (cause, conflict, concern, commitment, conception, consequence, conduct, conviction). See Pansters, “Franciscan Conversion.”

<sup>47</sup> See also Ilona Buddingh’-Maas, *Begin met duurzaamheid. Hoe je in vijf stappen je eigen visie vormt en samen met anderen een nieuwe realiteit creëert* (Zaltbommel: Dialog, 2017); Niki Harré, *Psychology for a Better World: Strategies to Inspire Sustainability* ([Auckland]: University of Auckland, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> See Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 240.

<sup>49</sup> *Encyclical Letter Laudato si’*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 1965), 213.

<sup>51</sup> See also Sandler, *Environmental Ethics*, 82-83: “Rather than changing behaviors or reforming ideologies and institutions, which are the sources of the problems, restoration employs scientific and technology power to imperfectly and inadequately repair and recreate ecological systems.” Sandler therefore pleads for “robust social, institutional, behavioral, and attitudinal changes” (108).

longer disturb good relations between people and thus be an obstacle to peacefulness and justice.<sup>52</sup> Francis' spiritual teaching of living without anything of one's own and going humbly through the world is also one of the main inspirations of *Laudato si'*, as is evident from the beginning of the document: "I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure."<sup>53</sup> The paragraph on Saint Francis is one of the most beautiful passages, in which Pope Francis explains what he finds so fascinating about him: the combination of concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace. My favorite passage, however, is another one: Pope Francis' call to ecological conversion. For many years, I have investigated the meaning of the Christian virtues for individual and social well-being. Many evangelical and Pauline virtues, but also the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, can be considered of great importance for the good life and peaceful living today. For are "rendering to everyone his due" (a classical definition of justice) or "not using more than is necessary" (temperance) not also crucial for sustainable living here and now? In this respect, Pope Francis also mentions "living wisely," "bold decisions," and so forth. In recent years, however, I have started to ask myself what triggers the start of living according to the virtues – which in popular debates have come to be seen in a very bad light ("moral crusader," "virtue signalling"). What is the occasion or starting point that makes it possible that the eyes of a person are opened in a moral sense and one becomes susceptible to the priority of the greater, self-transcending, good? What causes the inner reversal from self-interest to an openness to matters of shared value? Without such a moral conversion occurring in an individual's innermost being, virtues must certainly remain theoretical constructs.<sup>54</sup>

Pope Francis emphasizes the need for such an inner reversal when he speaks about "ecological conversion" and I find that a very smart move. Traditionally, conversion has been associated not only with the beginning of a new (religious) life but also with coercion and domination. However, I am happy to read in *Laudato si'* that conversion has everything to do with spiritual richness, the renewal of humanity, and "an interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning

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<sup>52</sup> This conclusion was published earlier as "Sustainability Permanently Anchored in People's Behavior," <https://www.franciscanconnections.com/blog.php?bid=25>.

<sup>53</sup> *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> See also the forthcoming volume with proceedings of the international virtual conference "Agents of Change: Moral Conversion and Social Transformation," organized by the Franciscan Study Center and the Thomas Institute Utrecht at Tilburg University, 29 June – 1 July 2022.

to our individual and communal activity.”<sup>55</sup> Profound inner change is directly connected to communion with all that surrounds us. Overall personal conversion “calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness.”<sup>56</sup> Encouraged by this appealing paragraph in *Laudato si’* to reflect further on the possibilities of such an ecological conversion, I have arrived at the following three basic elements of a moral turnaround: aversion, introversion, and adversion. The Covid-19 crisis here functions as a magnifying glass. Should we not seize the moment and *turn away* from self-centeredness and the desire for non-essentials that ultimately disadvantage others? Should we not, while we have to stay at home and make great sacrifices, also learn to radically renounce irresponsible behavior and social indifference? Should we not, while our home is our world, teach ourselves to *turn inward* into the innermost of our hearts in order to find there, and not in production and consumption, a more significant satisfaction? It is a great paradox that, although this crisis has exposed our own insignificance and vulnerability, at the same time through quarantines we are thrown upon, and back into, ourselves. But should we not also educate ourselves by way of selfless dedication and generosity to *turn toward* the immense importance of the other, especially of the sick and lonely, but also of all other creatures with which we are “joined in a splendid universal communion”? Let us discuss the medical necessities and, no less, the moral requirements – the enduring ethical engagement – that can be asked of everybody, especially now.<sup>57</sup>

History teaches us that after a great crisis people do not necessarily turn in droves to restoring goodness and doing good: “from now on everything will be different.” Many will fall back right away into old behaviors supported by habit and convenience. At the same time, we are also creatures of hope, a virtue that enables us to deem possible a truly better future for everyone. I therefore suggest that we decide to apply ourselves – with hopefully as many people as possible – to the shaping of a sustainable sustainability, a durable environmentalism that is securely anchored in people’s behavior. Let us give substance to the vision that in the coming years, individual human beings will make the shift “from satisfactions to value,” from chasing self-interests to committing themselves to common goods and matters of shared value. This ethical turnaround, which starts with the question “what the h\*\*\* am I doing?”

<sup>55</sup> *Encyclical Letter Laudato si’*, 216.

<sup>56</sup> *Encyclical Letter Laudato si’*, 220.

<sup>57</sup> See also Krijn Pansters, “Turning Toward the Common Good, Here and Now: Rules of Fraternal Living in *Fratelli tutti*,” *Franciscan Connections/The Cord* 70 (2020): 17-19.



can come from various directions: from inside (insight and conviction), from outside (incentive and encounter), and from above (inspiration and revelation). But what does this turnabout really look like? What are its contemplative, active, and reflective modes? And what its characterizing commitments and competences? Can we make radical reorientations toward real responsibilities happen? Can people be moved towards a moral conversion to interests of greater value? Affirmative answers can surely be found in our collective trying and training to become better-in-relationship, in order to find satisfaction in true concern and in fertile ethical acts for the sake of the well-being of all.