

The Impossibility of Sustainability and the Reversal of Time

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The paper makes two theses: In the current age of the Anthropocene, the concept of sustainability, as it is widely used, has to be considered impossible. Nevertheless, the existentialist figure of the reversal of time of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard may open up a new perspective on the sustainability problem and possible courses of action.

1. The Impossibility of Sustainability

In the German discourse, the concept of sustainability first appears in a monograph on forestry by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in 1713. It refers to the restoration and long-term preservation of the natural environment.¹ Von Carlowitz is primarily concerned with wood, as it was the essential natural resource of his time, and makes his analysis looking back on an era of excessive waste of natural resources and mismanagement during the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648).² Nowadays, we find the concept of sustainability in countless interdisciplinary publications. There are debates on strong versus weak sustainability³, and in neoliberal environmental economics, different models of capital are used to define and measure it.⁴ Contemporary approaches share with von Carlowitz the idea of looking back on an era of mismanagement, here on the era of fossil fuels, and the focus on the long run and long-term thinking.

But what exactly is the long run? This question becomes especially important if the idea of sustainability is preservation. The sun has hydrogen for maybe another 5 billion years, and life on earth becomes impossible 1.6 billion years from now.⁵ So neither is the sun *green*, nor is solar energy a sustainable for of energy supply, if we mean by sustainable that it literally can be sustained. The sun is a gigantic nuclear power plant with limited resources, so sustainability seems to be impossible. And even if it was possible by somehow shifting between different modes of capital and by the ultimate salvation by technology, a brief look at the news reveals to us that it is very unlikely that the appropriate political decisions will be made on a global level.

This rather pessimistic outlook is supported by contemporary research in geosciences. Steffen shows graphs of acceleration and exponential growth that all start around the 19th century⁶: Population, real GDP, FDI, river dams, water use, fertilizers, urban population, paper use, motor vehicles, telephones, tourism, carbon dioxide emissions, ozone depletion, surface temperature, floods, loss of rainforests, domesticated land, and so on. All graphs look more or less the same, all follow the same pattern of exponential growth. A mere look at these graphs suggests that these processes may have to be considered unstoppable. It is precisely the thesis of the age of the Anthropocene by Crutzen and Stoermer that implies that traces of humanity are already everywhere.⁷ We can dig as deep as we want, we will find traces of humanity in the deepest layers of the earth on all continents. With

¹ von Carlowitz, *Sylvicultura oeconomica*, 77-78.

² von Carlowitz, *Sylvicultura oeconomica*, 82.

³ Ott, *Umweltethik*, 163.

⁴ Ison et. al. *Environmental Issues*, 111-113.

⁵ von Weizsäcker, *Natur*, 31-43.

⁶ Steffen et. al., "Anthropocene", 851-852. Steffen, *Global Change*, 17.

⁷ Lore Hühn gave me this hint and she called the debate on the Anthropocene the post-sustainability discourse.

regards to the sustainability discourse, this means precisely that the damage is already done. There is no restoration and preservation of a natural environment, and the concept of nature itself becomes deceptive.⁸ What appears as nature has deep cultural imprints.

In sum, sustainability, understood as restoration and preservation of nature, is a pre-Anthropocene concept, which was very well applicable in 18th century thought, but which isn't today. The idea of sustainment is counterfeit by the fact that, as even solar energy supply is limited, the time frames in question have to be considered essentially finite. The damage to the natural environment is already done, it is largely irreversible, and ongoing. Sustainability has to be considered impossible. In the following part, the paper goes back to the writings of Søren Kierkegaard for possible courses of action.

2. The Reversal of Time

Kierkegaard's speech "At a Grave" from 1845 is a core text by the Danish thinker regarding topics such as negativity, nihilism, and the good life.⁹ It may be his most secular text. "At a Grave" contains the core of the existentialist philosophy of death in short¹⁰, its motives were later used by Martin Heidegger¹¹ and Albert Camus¹² in key passages of their respective main works. In his speech, Kierkegaard makes three main points. The first one claims that death is decisive.¹³ Man cannot stop time, but death can, as the absolute ending of the individual life, which, as existence, is the core of Kierkegaard's idea of reality. Therefore, death offers a universal perspective on life. Secondly, death is not definable.¹⁴ It is precisely the *nothing* that makes human beings being nothing, that annihilates them. And finally, death is inexplicable.¹⁵ Nothing is explained, death explains nothing, and man's philosophical desire for an explanation and final answers remains unanswered. So how should we relate to this phenomenon?

Well, we should be serious about it, since, in the age of the plurality of perspectives, death offers the universal perspective on life by threatening us fundamentally throughout our lifetimes. Kierkegaard explains this in the following key line: "[...] to think: it is over, life is lost, in order to win everything in one's lifetime: that is seriousness."¹⁶ "At a Grave" contains here the figure of a double movement of loss and win, which is structurally key to Kierkegaard's other main works on the good life and the question how life should be lived, especially *Fear and Trembling*¹⁷ and *The Sickness Unto Death*¹⁸. As the individual life does not go on forever, but is radically and essentially finite, it has to be lived not from a point in time towards infinity. On the contrary, life has to be lived by a realization, anticipation and visualization of its inevitable end, and, from there, towards the *real* present and the real human self. It is precisely the anticipation of death that wakes me up from autopiloting and being busy with all kind of things, and lets me discover my real task and my real self, opening up a new sense of possibility.

⁸ Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 107, 325.

⁹ Rasmussen, "Self", 208.

¹⁰ Schulz, "Welt", 13.

¹¹ Heidegger, *Sein*, 235-267.

¹² Camus, *Mythe*, 75-92.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 5, 448.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 5, 454.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 5, 464.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 5, 447.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 4, 131.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 11, 181.

Time is reversed here.¹⁹ There is a movement in thought not from the present towards the future, but from the future towards the present, that goes beyond the idea of the sequential time of physics. In physics, one prolongs the horizontal axis towards infinity, so the future is a mere continuation of the past. In a world dominated by this thought, people are stuck in their everyday lives, live as if things continue forever, and are then caught by surprise by sickness and death. In contrast to how life is often lived, it should be lived not towards the future, but from the future towards the self.

It is precisely here where the paper suggests an analogy argument to the sustainability problem: The times spans in question when we talk about the long run, and time of humanity as such, are essentially finite. So the sustainability problem should not be conceived from a present point in time towards infinity, but, on the contrary, via a realization and anticipation of its inevitable failure, and from there towards the present. This approach offers a new perspective on the sustainability problem by offering a new concept of freedom. It frees humanity from unrealistic and impossible tasks, and shifts its view towards reality. We can ask questions such as “What is really important in the medium and longer-term future?” and “What could be steps towards a more sustainable international framework?”, always keeping in mind that a more-sustainable framework is not a sustainable one. Instead of doing very little to nothing and staring at the impossible task of long-term sustainability, this change of thought opens up new perspectives of choice and change, always knowing that it is all going to fail in the end. As, according to Kierkegaard, idealist ethics neither reach reality, nor do they reach the real human self, it is this new form of second, negative ethics that remains as ethics under the condition of the modern age.²⁰ Its starting point is an acknowledgement of a negativity of reality that is impossible to overcome.

3. Outlook: Sustainability and Global Justice

In this part, the paper shall sketch the connection between the debate on sustainability and another big debate in the field of so-called applied ethics or practical philosophy, the global justice debate. Concerning their relationship, it is generally assumed that a sustainable international framework is also a fair one²¹, that sustainability and global justice are, in principle, complementary goals. But what if, as argued above, sustainability is indeed impossible? What if the goals are not complementary, but neutral, or even conflicting? It is at least possible, or thinkable, that under the conditions of the Anthropocene, the global justice debate may outweigh the sustainability debate as a whole.

Even if one does not agree with Bentham that suffering is *the* moral category²², there is little doubt that it is *a* moral category, that suffering is morally relevant. With regard to global justice, there is real suffering here and now: Approximately 20,000 people die from hunger each day, more than 840 million suffer from hunger and malnutrition.²³ If we account for deaths that are not only related to hunger, but to global poverty in general, e.g. not being able to afford a pack of cheap antibiotics, the number of people dying each day moves closer to 50,000. Almost 3 billion people live in poverty, more than one billion people have no access to safe drinking water, more than 2.5 billion people have no access to basic sanitary facilities.²⁴ In contrast to this reality of incredible suffering, the sustainability debate is concerned with potential suffering of imaginary people, with an imaginary

¹⁹ Theunissen, “Gegenwart”, 203, 206.

²⁰ Hühn, *Konstellationen*, 231.

²¹ Steigleder, “Politics”, 178-180.

²² Bentham, *Introduction*, 11.

²³ Benatar, *Better*, 89.

²⁴ Pogge, “Anerkannt”, 95-98.

future that, if one follows the argument of the first part, is not sustainable, and will end in catastrophe anyway.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, those who do not access to sanitary facilities cannot regularly wash their hands with soap. More than 2 billion people cannot perform the most basic protective measure, which would by the way not only protect them against COVID-19, but also against numerous other diseases. And there is very little to no effort to change that. A global need for water supply and soap does not make the news, as the other 2-3 billion people in countries with high capital endowment put their hopes on high-tech vaccines to bring back their normal lives. It is that latter group that is worried about organic food, recycling, electric cars, and a sustainable future, while it is what they call their *normal lives* that caused most of the environmental problems in the first place.

This paper argues that there is a need for a radical change of perspective, as it suggests that maybe stopping worrying about a sustainable vision of infinity, and instead acknowledging the fundamental negativity of reality, might be of help towards a change.

4. Discussion

The paper was presented at the 14th Biennial Radical Philosophy Conference in November 2021. As I am very thankful for the vivid discussion afterwards, I decided to include a couple of key points here.

A question was asked about the contemporary use of the term sustainability in marketing and whether it isn't a contradiction to talk about the impossibility of sustainability and a more sustainable international institutional framework. To me, it is precisely the theoretical vagueness of the concept of sustainability which makes it vulnerable to be instrumentalized for profit maximization. The core of this problem seems to be that sustainability is an outdated, a pre-Anthropocene concept. There is no contradiction between the impossibility of sustainability and a more sustainable framework precisely because a more sustainable framework isn't a sustainable one.

It was remarked that Kierkegaard is a theological thinker, to which I basically agree. Although "At a Grave" a one of his most secular texts, one could still argue that it is embedded in an overall religious paradigm, to which I would also rather agree. Nevertheless, I argue that it is possible to extract structures and figures from that context, and apply them in a context that does not share Kierkegaard's basic theological-anthropological assumptions, as Heidegger and Camus demonstrate in the passages referred to in the paper. The thesis that Adorno is another example of the application of Kierkegaardian thought in a non-theological context was controversy discussed.

Regarding the question why the paper does not refer to the writings and ideas of Karl Marx, I would answer that the paper does by no means claim that Marx is irrelevant in the discussion of the sustainability problem and the Anthropocene. It was merely the task I set for myself in this paper to work on Kierkegaard's contributions to these debates, and here I also just focused on the figure of the reversal of time. Further contributions by Kierkegaardian thought to these discussions might be his thesis of the primacy of crisis in *The Sickness Unto Death*²⁵, his question of how exactly the concept of transition, including historical transitions, has to be theoretically understood in *The Concept of Anxiety*²⁶ or in the *Philosophical Fragments*²⁷, or his thesis that concrete individual duties

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 11, 141.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 4, 415.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 4, 248.

can no longer be generally specified²⁸, that any intersubjective 'ought' is in the end repressive.²⁹ Kierkegaard's yearning for a new beginning³⁰ might be more urgent than ever. Kierkegaard and Marx observed the same phenomena of the upcoming bourgeoisie and capitalist societies in the middle of the 19th century, without having had knowledge of one another.³¹ Although they interpreted what they saw in very different theoretical frameworks, Marx in the framework of materialism and Kierkegaard in the framework of Christianity, both Hegel-critics agree in their critique of phenomena of leveling and of reversal or perversion.³² Kierkegaard and Marx are, to use a phrase of Kierkegaard, very close and incredibly far apart.³³

A final aspect concerning the Marxist critique is that even if capitalist production stopped tomorrow, sustainability would still be impossible. The damage is already done – that is the most basic insight from the debate on the Anthropocene. So the right way to ask is "What to do in the meantime?", where the time in question is specifically recognized and acknowledged as the meantime between the already catastrophic current state and final catastrophe.

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²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 4, 330.

²⁹ Hühn, *Konstellationen*, 209.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 4, 227.

³¹ Adorno, *Konstruktion*, 315.

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³³ Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* 11, 141.

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