

Values for Sustainable Future: Transforming Values in the Context of Climate Change and Global Environmental Degradation

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Synthesis

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary project aimed to explore new pressing challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation. Global environmental crisis tests existing institutions and technologies, political and socio-economic systems. Business-as-usual approach underpinned by the idea of unlimited growth is no longer an option on a planet with finite resources. Humans are facing a multi-layered collective action problem, or rather a Gordian knot of problems, which emerges from unsustainable practices, behavior, and choices of billions of people and millions of businesses.

Global environmental crisis reflects the crisis of the Western system of values which let a few countries gain wealth and develop incredible technology over the past few centuries but also created serious social injustices and disrupted a harmonious co-existence of humans and nature. This project looks at the process of societal transformation that is required as a response to climate change and environmental degradation. This process is strongly influenced by political and economic forces and by technology. But the central component of the societal transformation is a shift in values that would allow the world to enter a more sustainable path to develop in the future, a transition towards sustainability.

The challenge of interdisciplinarity

Climate change and global environmental degradation pose many challenges which can be resolved with technological breakthroughs, advances in science, political will, political innovations, economic measures, and social change. A value shift towards sustainability, though concerned with the societal transformation, also requires an open-minded interdisciplinary inquiry into its origins, state and prospects.

A value shift is predominantly about normative change. It is important to understand what the right, fair, good state of affairs we should strive to. Thus, an input from philosophers is crucial if we want to understand why the change is necessary, what triggered the transformation, and what its most likely directions are. In case of a value shift towards sustainability research in environmental philosophy and ethics can shed light on the ethical foundations of the transition.

A value shift is also a dynamic concept that has an empirical dimension which is researched by social and political science scholars. Social psychologists have long looked into values as pre-determinants of human behavior and analyzed what can trigger large scale social changes. Institutional transformation and influence on people's behavior is a domain of political science. Some perspectives from this discipline were used to describe structural dimensions of a value shift. Considering that this dissertation looks into global cross-border challenges, some perspectives from international relations were also employed.

Building bridges among disciplines is not an easy or straightforward task but it has to be done in the context of climate change. While writing this thesis I faced multiple practical challenges regarding the interdisciplinary nature of the work. The idea from the start was to look at a process (a value shift) to put together and develop interconnections among the relevant views, arguments, and findings from different disciplines that could inform a holistic perspective on the subject. This theoretical inquiry sliced through several disciplines and tackled a constellation of approaches from philosophy, social and political sciences.

Bringing together different disciplines means creating a large pool of mixed vocabulary, when sometimes same terms mean different things or processes. But terms and definitions are in fact a minor concern compared to navigating among various perspectives and assumptions that are taken for granted in some disciplines and dismissed in others. A serious challenge was also to allocate sufficient space to the relevant views of one discipline without compromising the input from others. From the start I have decided to concentrate on the

normative dimensions of the shift (because the concept is far from being clear and well-developed). Yet, at the same time creating a comprehensive normative perspective was impossible without checking against existing empirical social and political research.

Brief outline and the key findings of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of six chapters and its structure reflects an interdisciplinary nature of this work. Each chapter tackles a certain dimension or aspect of a value shift towards sustainability and includes a review of the relevant literature. In each chapter I pose a research question (that helps answer the main research question) and develop an argument as a response to it. Each question followed a certain logic and explored an aspect relevant to the main research question of this dissertation, namely a call for a holistic perspective on the issue of value shift towards sustainability.

Chapter 1 discussed ethical dimensions of climate change and the global environmental crisis. It outlined the shape of the problem as a Perfect Moral Storm model (Gardiner, 2011). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s philosophers targeted specific issues that fell within the scope of climate change. Various contributions to climate ethics were scattered and lacked coherent analytical framework. In 2006 Stephen Gardiner developed such a framework, an ethical analysis of climate change. He clustered different related moral problems into three groups: global, intergenerational and theoretical issues.

Gardiner calls these groups “storms” and, employing a “perfect storm” analogy¹, argues that it is a combination of these three particularly bad “storms” that obstructs us from ethical behaviour, makes us vulnerable to “moral corruption”, and constitutes a Perfect Moral Storm for humankind. The Perfect Moral Storm is a recognized framework in philosophical discussions related to climate change (e.g. A Changing Moral Climate Symposium at LUISS in 2013 was specifically focused on a broad discussion of the framework among philosophers). This thesis builds on the model and attempts to explore some of the questions that arise from Gardiner’s analysis.

After discussing various spatial, intergenerational and theoretical dimensions of climate change I look closer at the challenge of moral corruption and its connection to values. I argue

¹ The analogy with storms comes from a book by Sebastian Junger (1999), a real story of *Andrea Gail* fishing vessel which was caught up by a rare convergence of three particularly bad storms. This combination of storms was called *the perfect storm* and in the end destroyed the vessel.

that moral corruption is intimately linked to the dominant system of values and through this link it can be approached, understood and addressed. According to Gardiner (2013), in face of global environmental crisis we lack robust theory and intuitions to guide us. I agree and argue that we also lack values that would be more adequate to the new changing environmental conditions. Addressing gaps and flaws in the existing system of values could help cope with the global environmental crisis. My argument goes in line with Jamieson (2011, p.84) who argues that “unless we develop new values and conceptions of responsibility, we will have enormous difficulty in motivating people to respond to [climate change]”.

Chapter 2 looked into socio-psychological and philosophical dimensions of values and into their connection with virtues and individual character. It explored what new (sustainability) values were necessary to address the global environmental crisis. Values are principles or moral standards of a person or social groups; the generally accepted or personally held judgment of what is valuable and important in life. Social psychology literature tells us that people’s values and value orientations (altruistic and biospheric) influence the behavior of the people who hold them through beliefs and individual norms (e.g. Dietz et.al., 2006; Stern, 2000).

An interesting insight that emerged out of this interdisciplinary inquiry is that philosophers consider values to be a variable that can be changed (see, for example, Jamieson’s quote above), whereas social psychologists take a much more rigid stand on the concept and rather hold values as a constant, a category that is very hard and unlikely to change.

This chapter offers an account of sustainability values which were not previously explicitly defined in the literature. I define sustainability values as environmental and other values that help present generation meet or adjust their needs in a way that would not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainability values help achieve and maintain sustainability. Some of these values are already part of our value system; some will emerge naturally in a changing environmental context or will have to be developed. Defining and developing the concept of sustainability values and its elements is crucial to forming a normative perspective on a societal transformation as a response to the global environmental crisis.

In this chapter I also make a link between sustainability values and environmental virtues. I argue that individual moral motivations to act sustainably are underpinned by a combination of values and virtues that define both what is important, or valued, to the person and a disposition, a moral vector, to act in accordance with this value. Thus, in order to act sustainably (for moral reasons) one needs to rely both on values (to define why an action is important) and virtues (to guide this action). I also explore the mechanisms that underpin changes in values. I argue that values change as a result of self-reflection, deliberation and the use of role models.

Finally, I outline the key gaps in the dominant system of values in developed states. In my view, the key problems are the deeply-rooted self-reinforcing culture of consumerism, the lack of individual responsibility for the global environmental change, and the lack of concerns for remote future generations that are most likely to be affected by the consequences of our actions today.

Chapter 3 addressed the question of how a value shift could be achieved. In order to answer this question, I employed perspectives from social and political sciences, law and international relations. First, I discuss some past examples of value shifts, including the abolition of slavery and women's emancipation. These examples support my argument that a value shift towards sustainability is not an exceptional one-time process in history. Values have changed in the past and will continue to change in the future.

Shifts in values are an integral part of the development of a society, and, more specifically, of the moral evolution of humanity. I view moral progress as a caravan of subsequent shifts in values. Like smartphones these days require regular upgrades of their operating systems to function better, so does our morality gets "upgrades" now and then in the form of value shifts. I argue that a shift towards sustainability values is one of those value shifts that indicate moral evolution of humanity and resembles Singer's (1981 / 2011) expanding circle of moral concern.

One aspect that makes transition towards sustainability values special is that in case of most of environmental issues there is no manifestation of injustice in people's daily lives. Most people in developed states do not live through negative consequences of environmental degradation. They do not get to lose their families or friends, land or home in natural disasters. They are not expelled from their natural habitat or die of hunger and changing

natural conditions, like other species. They normally do not personally suffer from or even see injustice related to environmental degradation in their daily lives. They have to trust what they hear or read about it in the news or from other occasional sources.

Unlike social injustice which is in plain sight (like mistreatment of slaves by a neighbor few hundred years ago), it is always possible to ignore or pay less attention to the stories about environmental issues. Lack of personal experience and attachment to the problem has major implications to our moral motivations to act and think sustainably. When it comes to taking the next step in moral evolution of humankind, it is unclear whether solely awareness and knowledge about the problem are really enough to extend our circle of moral concern which was developing for hundreds and thousands of years.

I then explore the connection between values and norms and its implications for a value shift. Sustainability embodies many norms. We can talk about pro-environmental social norms, like recycling, eating less or no meat, using bicycles or public transport, or about international norms reflected in ozone depletion, anti-whaling, or wildlife trade regimes. Thus, there is no such one norm as sustainability but there are many norms of sustainability. These norms are strongly intertwined with values and play an important role in a value shift towards sustainability. I argue that a value shift towards sustainability requires a combination of various changes in values and norms which would result in certain patterns of behavior that will reduce an overall footprint of humans on the planet.

Finally, I argue that a value shift towards sustainability is already on the way and analyze the signs that indicate the ongoing transformation at a global, regional, national, and local, corporate and organizational, and individual levels. Then I suggest that the actors who could be advancing a value shift towards sustainability are the states and political parties, international organizations, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) and social movements, businesses, and individual norm entrepreneurs. The tools at the disposal of these actors are legal changes (a form of imposition available to governments only), awareness raising and education (forms of persuasion). I place most hope in persuasive methods and argue that those communicating sustainability should take into account motivational impacts of social roles and virtues on behavior.

Chapter 4 focused on one specific value that is central to sustainability, namely care for remote future generations. It explored what is the place of concerns for posterity in the

existing system of values and what are the ways to strengthen them. The underlying normative puzzle that this chapter addressed was the Pure Intergenerational Problem (PIP) formulated by Gardiner as part of the intergenerational dimension of the Perfect Moral Storm.

The PIP derives its logic from the Tragedy of the Commons and Prisoner's Dilemma. Tragedy of the Commons (Hardin, 1968) is essentially a Prisoner's Dilemma involving a common resource. The agents in this game are international players, such as (most of the time) *states* but sometimes also corporations and international organizations. Tragedy of the Commons describes the spatial dimension of climate change. In order to explain its intergenerational dimension, Gardiner innovatively applies the same logic to *generations* as agents.

Gardiner's analysis generates two claims. On the one hand, it is collectively rational for most generations to cooperate and restrict overall emissions to avoid disastrous consequences of climate change. On the other hand, it is individually rational for each particular generation to continue their emissions (meaning, economic growth and development, business-as-usual), no matter what others do. Each generation is tempted to postpone taking long-term action which goes against their short-term business-as-usual interests, increasing the burden and the risk for the consequent generations. The problem of intergenerational buck-passing and the clash of collectively and individually rational choices are central to the PIP.

I argue that strengthening concerns for remote posterity and intergenerational solidarity is a way to avoid the Pure Intergenerational Problem by changing its context and the underlying incentives for people's choices in the game. If a childless person who was previously making decisions regarding the future suddenly became a parent, her decisions will most likely change due to a new concern that was introduced into her pool of incentives and payoffs. The same logic can be applied to concerns for remote posterity which can alter people's moral motivations to act sustainably and make sacrifices for the future.

I also look at forward-looking concerns as a value and as a virtue. A way to strengthen the value at an individual level is to appeal to virtues that can help realize it. The list of sustainability values is a "work in progress". The pull of virtues, however, is limited. There is only as many virtues and vices that our moral theories can generate – and that are needed to guide our moral behavior. Thus, I suggest that concerns for remote posterity could be considered an existing, yet weak, value that has to be strengthened. It can be strengthened by

appealing to the virtues of farsightedness, love, compassion, care, cooperation, and benevolence that are already accepted as good examples of moral conduct in our societies.

I then explored the ways in which concerns for future generations can be advanced and looked at the place of this value in political rhetoric, advocacy and education. Concerns for posterity, in my view, are on the way to become a recognized international norm, like peace or tolerance. One piece of evidence to this claim is a recently published UN Secretary General's Report on Intergenerational Solidarity and the Needs of Future Generations (2013), in writing which I participated during my internship at the UN Division for Sustainable Development in summer 2013. The report was written as a response to the call from Major Group Children and Youth at Rio+20 Conference in 2012 to appoint an ombudsman or set up an institution which would ensure that the rights and interests of future people are taken into consideration.

I also analyzed how future generations are present in the international political rhetoric by looking at the General Assembly General Debate that took place in September 2013 and was themed to reflect on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. I have conducted a content analysis of all the speeches available in English (original texts, not summaries or translations). Out of 162 speeches in English 35 contained references to future generations in connection with sustainable development. Even more contained more general references to the future.

Out of 35 states that touched in their speeches upon our obligations to future generations there were 6 developed and 29 developing states. All 6 developed states are in Europe (France, Ireland, Hungary, Slovenia, Liechtenstein and Croatia). Only first 4 of these states are OECD members. Among the 29 developing countries in focus 6 states are from Africa and the Middle East, 2 states from Central America and 3 states from Asia. But by far the largest and most vocal group of countries that spoke about future generations (and more generally about sustainable development) were the 15 SIDS, Small Island Developing States.

The geographical distribution of those expressing concerns for posterity tells us that the "voice" of future generations are the states which have everything to lose from the changing environmental conditions and increasing ocean levels. The proportion of developed states expressing concerns for future generations is alarmingly small; yet, the inclusion of these concerns into the highest level political rhetoric surrounding sustainability is an important step on the way to recognizing and registering the value.

The last section of this chapter inquired into the place of concerns for posterity in the global educational agenda set up by UNESCO during the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). I have analyzed the founding and guiding documents that shape the scope of the educational agenda and concluded based on a content analysis that concerns for future generations are well-represented in it. However, the distinction between immediate posterity, like children and grandchildren, and remote future generations which is crucial to our moral motivations to act sustainably is blurred and is not emphasized enough in the agenda. These findings were published as an article (Vladimirova, 2014) and contributed to a book chapter currently under editorial review.

Chapter 5 stemmed from the analysis in Chapter 3 about the actors who can advance a value shift towards sustainability. I argue that out of all the possible actors ENGOS should play a central role in advancing the transition to the general public due to their reputation and the highest levels of trust than any other actors enjoy (Edelman's Barometer, 2014). I criticize the narrow view of studies that explore ENGO activity on the global political arena in the past two decades and view politics as practice associated solely with governments. Most studies have looked into ENGO activity primarily to find out what is the influence of these actions on the states and international institutions.

I suggest to reconsider ENGOS as accessories to governments and international institutions and instead recognize that with time some ENGOS have grown large, credible and powerful enough to mobilize public opinion, create environmental concerns, change values, norms, attitudes, and behavior. I build on the argument put forward by Paul Wapner in 1995 and argue that this type of action that bypasses governments (direct political action) should be recognized by ENGOS and other political actors as political action by its own right. Some of the ENGOS became powerful norm entrepreneurs capable of advancing transition towards sustainability.

In questioning ENGOS' preoccupation with states I ask what environmental, sustainability and climate change policies aim at. I assume that the end goal is to have a sustainable and just society. What need to be changed are unsustainable social norms and practices combined of individual choices and behavior. As I have argued earlier, crucial method to achieve such a radical and large scale transformation is persuasion, not direct force (including economic and legal measures). In order to achieve compliance, it is essential that a critical mass of people understands the need for change. In the end, people whose aggregated decisions really matter

are individual members of the society, and these people need to be persuaded and enabled (with relevant infrastructure).

When ENGOs target states, they expect governments to produce efficient policies and do the actual work to convince the public to change their ways or put people in an economic and legal frameworks where they would have to alter their behavior. ENGOs assume that their role is to convince governments “to do something”. Moreover, ENGOs persuade the general public to support them in reaching out to governments. There certainly are some structural changes that can only be done by states. But when it comes to individual choices and behavior, ironically, it looks like ENGOs convince the general public that it is necessary to convince the governments to convince the general public what the right thing to do is.

Finally, in **Chapter 6** I attempt to find out what kind of values ENGOs promote to the general public as part of their outreach activities. My key interest was to challenge a widely-held assumption that ENGOs are “ethical” agents “doing good”. The point was not to overturn this view completely but rather to try to get a better idea of how well-grounded these perceptions are. As studies show, sometimes the public trust NGOs even without being really able to explain why (GlobeScan, 2012). If unfounded trust as a trend continues unchecked, at some point it might result in general disenchantment of the public with these actors. Thus, the assumptions underpinning public trust and actual behavior of ENGOs should be analyzed under more scrutiny.

One way to assess how ENGOs live up to expectations is simply to compare expectations to reality. High level of public trust implies that ENGOs are expected to have a solid ethical stand which the public shares. For the public to know about this moral position – and about related ethical challenges – it is necessary that the ENGOs communicate to the public what values underpin their work and why they do what they do. An analysis of outreach communication of ENGOs to the general public could help understand what ENGOs want their supporters to consider important, what ideas and solutions they promote, and which moral reasons ENGOs advance to motivate the public to act on a problem.

Out of a wide range of ENGOs and civil society groups I selected two ENGOs, WWF and Greenpeace. The main reasons for this choice are their recognisability and global presence. The analysis focused on the climate change campaigns of these ENGOs. Text, graphic and video materials for the period between 2008 and 2013 from their international websites and

YouTube channels were collected, imported into, coded and analyzed in NVivo, software used for qualitative analysis. Extensive coding of the data generated many interesting findings which are presented in detail in the main body of the dissertation.

The findings of this study confirm that concerns of justice, equity, vulnerability, intra- and intergenerational solidarity are rather poorly represented in climate change campaigns of WWF and Greenpeace. Concerns about energy and international climate politics were much more prominent. Climate change was framed in these campaigns primarily as a challenge of switching from old, unsustainable sources of energy to new, sustainable ones. This thread, by far, dominated the whole narrative. The second most visible theme was framing climate change as a matter of international politics, as an issue to be resolved by countries, through international collaboration and national efforts – as opposed to individual changes in habits, attitudes, lifestyles.

This study identified key values that underpin climate campaigns of WWF and Greenpeace. The strongest emphasis was made on development, belief in progress of science and technology, belief in power of governments and importance of international political action of countries, and security and safety aspects of climate change. Values such as respect for nature, positive role of community, health, employment and individual action were also represented in these campaigns. An important place was given to future-oriented concerns and to framing climate change as a strategic, long-term problem.

The findings of this study confirm that WWF and Greenpeace do not account for differences in the interpretation of the term “future generations” and its implications to people’s moral motivation to act sustainably. They frequently use images of children in their graphic and video materials, especially children from indigenous communities and least developed countries. The images of children are the one graphic representation of a link to the future, a representation of future generations.

Overall, these campaigns trigger sentiment towards children but they do not really encourage the public to think about longer-term effects of our unsustainable actions. They focus on today’s costs and benefits, on specific technological solutions, and do not provide a bigger picture of global and individual moral responsibilities. Ethical positions of WWF and Greenpeace are not properly explained or justified, they are mostly assumed to be implicit.

Bridging the theory of values with actual messages through which they are communicated was an important interdisciplinary link that illuminated the practical dimensions of advancing sustainability. It is important to note here that while I chose to focus on ENGOs as the most likely “ethical” agents to advance a vision of sustainability, the same method of distilling values from campaigns, advertisement and other outreach activities can be easily applied to other actors active in sustainability discourse, such as governments, businesses, international organizations, and individual norm entrepreneurs.

Each group of actors, I believe, would have a distinct pattern of values that they choose to advance, some of which would overlap with other actors but some would be specific to each group. Future research inquiries and creating a “map” of values advanced by different actors could confirm or disprove this hypothesis. More studies are also needed to improve our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the formation and transfer of values. This is a fruitful ground for cooperation among ethicists, communication and education scholars and social psychologists.

Concluding remarks

Climate change and global environmental crisis are altering the conditions in which people live. The world in which our grandchildren will live will be different from the one we live in today and also from the world which their grandchildren will be born into. The rapid scale of global environmental change will force people to adapt their ways and practices. However, this process does not have to be postponed to the future, when there will be no choice. Knowing the potential (and likely) disastrous consequences of climate change to which each and every one of us contributes should be enough to encourage people to think about their individual contribution and re-evaluate their daily routines, choices and practices.

Blaming “the government” or “corporations” for destroying the climate is hypocritical if one herself does not take any action to limit her ecological footprint. Many individual changes will contribute to a greater transformation and to a value shift towards sustainability. But, in my view, this change should be a conscious choice rather than a forced decision. People should be aware of the fact that some new moral principles more appropriate to the changing world should be jointly developed through deliberation and individual self-reflection – and followed. And this dissertation was an attempt to bring together knowledge relevant to fulfilling this task.