

What is Levinasian in Sustainability?: Sustainability in the Economy of Being through Levinas' *Le Tiers*

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Abstract: This study is motivated by the rising need to express the idea of sustainability as a form of ethical responsibility. Oftentimes discussed in the context of environmental conservation, I intend to incorporate the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to explain how the other Others (which he calls the Third—*le tiers*), in its diverse forms, can become a conduit to uphold sustainability for the human kind, and more particularly for the next generations. While the usual idea of sustainability seems to inhibit Levinas' idea of transcendence, I argue in this paper that it is nevertheless needed as human transcendence first occurs in the schema of totality and the economy of being.

Keywords: Levinas, economy of being, SDGs, sustainability

Sustainability is a theme that is not a stranger among social scientists because it is generally concerned about the supposed alignment of environmental preservation with economic development. It is a common target among corporations, particularly in the exercise of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects, which gain revenue credits; and of industries because of government requirements to preserve the environment. For the global citizen, sustainability is a consumer-driven concern that somehow upholds justice since one as though exercise freedom in acquiring goods while keeping in mind that there are others with whom we share these goods and that there are future generations that should also enjoy the blessings of our planet.

Sustainability started to be legitimized as a global concern, in the midst of “technologization/computerization of industries,” in 1987 when the United Nations Brundtland Commission defined it as, “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet

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their own needs.”¹ Torelli rephrases it to show how its three core elements should be harmonized:

sustainability recalls first of all the environmental sphere (**environmental protection**) and a challenge to respect our resources (**economic growth**), firstly, to respect ourselves and our life, and secondly, to respect the next generation and their planet (**social inclusion**).²

To properly implement the above, Krososky cites companies’ best practices to echo six factors of sustainability, namely: climate change, environment, innovation, technology, people, and ethics/accountability.³

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁴ which were also called the Global Goals. These goals are, “a

¹ United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals,” *United Nations SDG*, <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda-retired/#:~:text=On%201%20January%202016%2C%20the,Summit%20%E2%80%94%20officially%20came%20into%20force>>.

² R. Torelli, “Sustainability, responsibility and ethics: different concepts for a single path,” *Social Responsibility Journal*, 17:5 (2021), 719–739, <<https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-03-2020-0081>>.

³ A. Krososky, “What are the six factors of sustainability and how do we adhere to them?,” in *Greenmatters* (March 2021), <<https://www.greenmatters.com/p/six-factors-of-sustainability>>.

⁴ The Sustainable Goals are as follows: 1. **No Poverty**: End poverty in all its forms everywhere, 2. **Zero Hunger**: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture, 3. **Good Health and Well-being**: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, 4. **Quality Education**: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, 5. **Gender Equality**: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, 6. **Clean Water and Sanitation**: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, 7. **Affordable and Clean Energy**: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, 8. **Decent Work and Economic Growth**: Promote sustained inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, 9. **Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure**: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation, 10. **Reduced inequality**: Reduce inequality within and among countries, 11. **Sustainable Cities and Communities**: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, 12. **Responsible Consumption and Production**: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, 13. **Climate Action**: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, 14. **Life Below Water**: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, 15. **Life on Land**: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss, 16. **Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, 17. **Partnerships to Achieve the Goal**: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. See also Jeffrey D. Sachs, Guillaume Lafortune

universal call to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.”⁵ This picks up from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which initiated the path to battle poverty, thereby cultivating new areas of concern that are supposed to be acted upon by all countries, the poor, middle-income and rich, recognizing that economic progress is a common interest of nations since it will guarantee improvement in the quality of life and the protection of the planet. To be more specific, it is in SDGs where all countries find a commonplace to work together for education, health, social protection, job opportunities, climate change, and environmental protection.

The seventeen goals are integrated, with each area capable of affecting others. In this case, these may be grouped into three categories according to the elements of development: Economic, Social and Environmental. Other institutions that collaborate with UN, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have aligned the SDGs into five pillars, namely, people, prosperity, peace, planet and partnerships.⁶

It is important to note that the SDGs lack legal binding. However, it is expected from the member nations of the UN that their governments should build national frameworks in line with these goals. Each bears the duty to monitor and evaluate the progress of their implementation of the goals, which require collecting quality, updated and transparent data. These national evaluation reports shall be cascaded on the regional level to contribute to global monitoring and review process. This matter is annually brought to the level of the UN Secretary General through an SDG Progress Report.

Obviously, these efforts need to be funded both by the governments and the private sector, and as estimated by the UN, in trillions of dollars. (If we assume that such projection was done in 2015, inflation and all that happened in the world between 2015 and 2023 must have bloated this at a large rate.) The means (i.e., financial means) of SDG implementation are monitored and evaluated according to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, an official document coming from the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. This is needed because the 2030 Goals have expanded to involve all nations and would need the involvement and investment of private institutions. The implementation of SDGs means a more pressing financial concern as compared to the implementation of the

and Grayson Fuller, *The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024* (Paris: Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2024), <<https://doi.org/10.25546/108572>>.

⁵ United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals.”

⁶ International Monetary Fund, “Sustainable Development Goals,” *IMF Website* (n.d.), <<https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/SDG>>.

MDGs which was only meant for developing countries and addressed only by governments.

Nevertheless, the challenge to sustainability is not to look at what is missing but to begin with what is present. Resources are available and, “there are far more enough savings in the world to finance the new agenda.”⁷ The proper way to start is to direct available resources as investments that support sustainable development. Public and private sectors should be mobilized to find domestic and international sources, with official development assistance, especially for countries in most need.

The Global Goals of 2030 therefore influence nations to work for this sustainable development, and by their mandates, create policies that encourage all sectors to follow the call to sustainability. Private companies, for example, already consider the SDGs as part of their business development agenda, as governments provide privileges such as tax deductions if they embark on the goals, and that the goals by themselves also guarantee institutional longevity. Commonly, sustainability is a noted agenda in companies’ Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In 2019, the Governance Accountability Institute (G&A) noted that 90% of large companies (S&P 500 Index) have published sustainability and responsibility reports, since it is a growing stakeholder expectation. It is said that 73% of investors are looking for environmental and social responsibility in business and that 77% of consumers are more likely to support brands committed to making the world a better place.⁸ Responses vary, such as when Novozymes, a world leader in biological solutions, has developed technology that reduces water for waste treatment. Clothing brands like H&M and Uniqlo use sustainable materials for making clothes (in the Philippines we have Bayo as representative), Starbucks get their coffee only from ethical source, support green building infrastructure and hire veterans and refugees are among the examples of how private businesses have responded to the call to sustainability.

Educational institutions also play their part. UNESCO states that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are distinctly at the forefront of the promotion of SDGs, serving as a benchmark for other economic sectors. Since universities and colleges are the vessels of higher learning and research, they obviously contribute to social progress by fostering SDG4 (quality education), and in the same aggressive manner put forward SDG4 (gender equality) and SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities). HEI’s teaching and learning help female social mobility, with research that identifies gender equality

⁷ United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals.”

⁸ Jane Courtneil, “Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability: What’s the Difference?,” *Green Business Bureau* (2022), <<https://greenbusinessbureau.com/business-function/executive/corporate-social-responsibility-and-sustainability-whats-the-difference/>>.

gaps, their reasons, and consequences. HEIs also fight against sexual violence, abuse and harassment on campuses with proactive policies and resources.⁹ As per sustaining cities and communities, HEIs foster the goals from the physical plant through the integration of campus into the urban environment, policy, and curriculum making by aligning the institutional goals up to the curriculum to the SDGs, and collaboration by integrating local and regional contexts in their research to solve urban problems. These are already evidenced by UNESCO's collaboration with Times of Higher Education that identified key dynamics and good practices of SDG11.

Philosophy Steps In

The growing concern on sustainability has also caught the attention of philosophers. Tim Delaney (2012) in his short introduction to a special issue on environmental sustainability in *Philosophy Now* mentioned how the issue can generate questions concerning social and physical conditions as they affect nature and humanity, and how ecosystem can hold, endure or bear the weight of many social and natural forces that may compromise its healthy operation.¹⁰ Delaney raised these concerns:

- Can the Earth sustain its current human population, or the population which on current projections, could be expected in 50,100 or 200 years' time?
- Could it sustain a good proportion of other animal species currently inhabiting it, or are we beginning to see a mass extinction like the one at the end of the Cretaceous?
- Can it sustain our expanding industrial civilization without undergoing catastrophic further climate change?
- If not, is there anything we can still do to avert disaster?

Rising philosophical concerns about sustainability are mainly focused on the environment, mainly because the earth is our first provider. It is the vessel of the food that we eat. Gradually, environmental ethics have become an expanse field to cover ruminations about the consumption and abuse of living organisms, from flora to fauna. Nevertheless, there is a rising trend that tackle sustainability in business ethics, on how the goals may sustain both the resources and the business itself. In the mainstream we hear

⁹ UNESCO, "Higher Education and the SDGs," UNESCO (2023), <<https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/the-contribution-of-higher-education-to-the-sdgs/>>.

¹⁰ Tim Delaney, "Sustainability," in *Philosophy Now*, 88 (January/February 2012), <<https://philosophynow.org/issues/88/Sustainability>>.

Roger Scruton, Peter Singer, Jim Moran, even Aristotle and Kant to name a few. But for this afternoon, I intend to share what could be relevant pieces of contribution from the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

Ideas that may consist of a Levinasian idea of sustainability are mainly derivative or hermeneutic. For one, there was no direct and argumentative note about environmental ethics or at least how to be ethical to the world. The most that he would talk about that might pass for a note on environmental ethics would be his note on *The Paradox of Morality* that, “the ethical extends to all living things.”¹¹ Another would be the story about his fondness for a street dog he named Bobby in the essay *The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights*. Both works derivatively note that the world beyond humans may be portrayed as an Other that calls for responsibility, only that the human holds the paragon of ethics. Nevertheless, Levinasian scholarship has vast articulations on environmental ethics by enriching hermeneutics of his notions of transcendence, infinity, the Other and justice. To name a few, we have contributions by Diane Perpich who wrote about how the problematic nonhuman regard of animals (or nature not having a face) is better viewed to provide an inspired environmental ethics through the political and not the ethical, since it is in human sociality where one thinks about what is good for both humans and animals.¹² Peter Atterton in exploring Levinas’ remarks about animals figured out what Levinas might refer to “the humanism of the other man” that opens the ethical dimension more than human interest and desire, considering that animals qualify as radically Other, way beyond any reductionist distinction.¹³ We also have Barbara Davy who argued about the need to critically cut through the idea of simply speaking of a Face for a nonhuman, which is possible only through an ethic extraneous to Levinas’ transcendent ethics that can radically go beyond “otherwise than being.”¹⁴

This project hopes to contribute to the discussion by seeking for Levinasian sources that may ethically enrich and critique the contemporary notion of sustainability. It can provide as a meta-ethic that hopes to humanize, nay, even transcend such anthropocentrism by looking for the meritorious significance of nature, the environment, and the animals—the

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, Alison Ainley, Peter Hughes, and Tamra Wright, “The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (ed.) *The Provocation of Levinas Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge, 1988), 172.

¹² Diane Perpich, “5 Scarce Resources? Levinas, Animals, and the Environment,” *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2008), 150–176, <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804779784-008>>.

¹³ Peter Atterton, “Levinas and Our Moral Responsibility Toward Other Animals,” in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 54:6 (2011), 633–649.

¹⁴ Barbara Jane Davy, “An other face of ethics in Levinas,” in *Ethics and the Environment*, 12:1 (2007), 39–66.

profound nonhumans that we certainly regard as Otherwise than Humans that blaringly call for human responsibility. Consequently, this meta-ethical inquiry also hopes to elaborate what it means to be just in the context of human sociality.

The title already raised the main question, “What is Levinasian in sustainability?” We shall address this by looking into three concerns. First is the exploration of what and why it should be sustained. This shall address the issue of consumption and nourishment through the metaphor of the tamarisk in the work *Heidegger, Gagarin and us*. Second is to posit such nonhuman implements in the ethical scenario through its regard as an other Other, or the Third; and in the context of sustainability, the one that can also nourish others. Finally, we hope to articulate how this Levinasian view can provide authentic ethical regard of nature that can improve the quality of life of all the organisms in this planet.

The Tamarisk: Rooted yet Growing

Heidegger, Gagarin and Us is an essay alluding to the feat of Yuri Gagarin, a cosmonaut who was able to defy the rootedness of gravity and being comfortable in a place. Levinas here provides a caricature and criticism of his time, by talking about how technology can make or break humanity, suspiciously pointing its philosophical roots to the ontological attitude in favor of presence, dwelling and enrootedness. Generally, the essay is a criticism of the contemporary way of thinking and living –how humanity could be so fascinated to things and the world, that their rediscovery would mean a useless emptying, losing, and falling short of realizing their true significance. In a more specific and philosophic sense, this appraisal is directed to Heidegger and Heideggerians whose ontology gave a very fond treatment to “there” in the concept of “being-there” (Dasein). For Levinas, over-attachment to presence developed an intellectual attitude that exploits and demystifies both the world and human becoming, eventually stifling the drive to conquer our ethical sluggishness.

Despite the critique, it is remarkable that Levinas mentioned about the tamarisk, one of the rare individual trees planted in the Bible, described in “all its freshness and color to charm the imagination in the midst of so much peregrination, across so much desert.”¹⁵ Levinas however warns us to look beyond the alluring image as it is an acronym, with three letters that when written in Hebrew are initials for Food, Drink and Shelter: “three things

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us,” *Difficult Freedom Essays on Judaism* (USA: The Athlone Press, 1990), 233.

necessary to man which offers to man.”¹⁶ Explicitly, Levinas designated the role of the earth as the vessel of implements, because “the earth is for that,” and that “man is his own master in order to serve man.”¹⁷ The tamarisk is used to symbolize the earth as a provider and must be respected in its own.

As a critical essay on technology, Levinas stresses the need to elevate the role of implements as ushers to transcendence, with tools belonging to the world, yet brings one forth out of the place,

technology does away with the privileges of this rootedness and the related sense of exile ... Technology wrenches us out of the Heideggerian world and the superstitions surrounding Place. From this point on, an opportunity appears to us: to perceive men outside the situation in which they are placed, and let the human face shine in all its nudity.¹⁸

But in the ethical recognition of the human face, Levinas points out that this profound anthropocentrism should also learn to respect the mystery of the earth. In verbatim, “let us remain masters of the mystery that the earth breaths.” Ethical humans should then also give space, respect the place where organism dwell in and for themselves. “The plant is not enough of a plant to define an intimacy with the world. A little humanity distances us from nature, a great deal of humanity brings us back.”¹⁹ As objects we enjoy while being comfortable in place, humans are also called to respect the nonhumans, since the enjoyment of the Place and its implements also call for its trusting and keeping. “And man, the keeper of Being will derive from this grace his existence and his truth.”²⁰

The Many Thirds

Levinasian scholarship have contributed to the ethical discussion of Levinas, who by hindsight have developed responses to bring his philosophical plantilla to bigger discussions. Early Levinasian scholarship has pointed to the notion of infinite responsibility as problematic since Levinas himself admitted how the condition of totality inhibits an exclusive relationship of the Self to a single Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, he mentioned how the encounter of the Face of the Other is disrupted by another

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 233–234.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

other, thereby adding a third persona in the ethical scenario which disrupts the supposed extent to the first Other (Autrui) and the disbursement of other responsibilities to all others (les autres). This introduced the problem of the other Others.

In order to accommodate the *autre*, Levinas introduces justice that would allow the Self to be responsible to the Other and for all others. Levinas addressed the problem of justice by the arbitration of institutions, particularly by the State. Governments should provide mechanisms of justice that transcend egoistic interests. Wyschogrod²¹ and Awerkamp pointed out rhetorical and metaphysical problems as Levinas seemingly raised a conflict between infinite responsibility and the rationale of justice, which further divided ethics and politics. Add to the problematique the threat of violence in the split of ethics and politics.²² Derrida reverberates this by posing how violence is nevertheless present in Levinas' very attempt to negate the violence of ontology (which is a violence towards violence), and of how such negation occurs in totality and more particularly in the economy of being.²³

Levinas recognizes this problem of violence, that he notes in *Philosophy, Justice and Love* that institutions as embodied ethical subjects must be cautious because there is an element of violence in the state, that can nevertheless be settled in life between states through negotiation and speech (Saying).²⁴ And this hard social truth, Levinas radically confronted (i.e., addressed) by hastening the description of responsibility as characterized by separation, ordination and height, with its radical manifestation by patience, substitution and even dying for the Other. He puts this point forward in other works and interviews, with a special stress, that the politics rising from this complex ethics require the wisdom of love.

Some Levinasians from the next wave (1981-2000) provided kind support by demonstrating diverse directions to see the role of the Third as a

²¹ Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: the Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974).

²² See Emmanuel Levinas, "In the Name of the Other," *Is it Righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. by Jill Robbins, trans. by Maureen Gedney (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 193. Commentators like Zygmunt Bauman and Don Awerkamp opine that ethics is always personal (focused on the individual) while politics is communal (as focused on the system). According to them, the inclusion of justice in the Levinasian paradigm puts up a kind of violence since it limits the infinite responsibility to the *Autrui* (in order to accommodate the *autre*). See Zygmunt Bauman, "Morality begins at Home: or the Rocky Road to Justice," in *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 46-70, and Don Awerkamp, *Ethics and Politics* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1977).

²³ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. by Claire Elise Katz and Lara Trout (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-88.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice and Love," in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 106.

functional component in putting ethics in politics, i.e., making ethics work in the economy of being. Bauman who upholds that “charity begins at home” capped off his critique of Levinas by a supplementary remark that justice can be resolved as an ethical problem by thinking of it as having a self-correcting mechanism, thereby accepting its fluxes as determined by the ethical encounter.²⁵ Llewelyn in finding appositions between Levinas and Derrida noted that political peace can only be achieved by exceeding pure political thinking. Burggraave provided possibilities to understand how Levinas’ ethics fundamentally occurs in the realities and finitudes of human situation (which is what the economy of being is all about), where responsibilities are oftentimes entrusted to institutions that are called to find “the wisdom of nations in the wisdom of love.”²⁶

In such setup, it is then possible to find the Third as an agent of responsibility, which could be a serendipitous source of ethical reciprocity. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas notes the eventual proximity (i.e., ethical space) between the other and the other other or the Third:

The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow ... The other stands in a relationship with the third party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question for my neighbor. The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party. ‘Peace, peace to the neighbor and the one far-off’ (Isaiah 57:19)—we now understand the point of this apparent rhetoric.²⁷

The epiphanies of the other and the third create an interplay between justice (through comparison, assembly, and order in coexistence)²⁸ and responsibility (and even substitution).²⁹ While there is full reason and sense in the arbitrary (and thematizing) work of justice, Levinas mentions that the very same work of justice brings forth the more ancient wisdom that justice

²⁵ Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 50–51.

²⁶ Roger Burggraave, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, trans. by Jeffrey Bloechl (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

passes by justice in being responsible for the other. More than the equality implied by justice, responsibility which occurs in facing the other, diffuses stringent arbitrations. This is so because in the social sphere, the other facing me assumes a more ambiguous otherness, as a much more unique other who could also have another ethical relation with others. "The other is from the first the brother of all the other men. The neighbor that obsesses me is already a face, both comparable and incomparable, a unique face and in relationship with faces, which are visible in the concern for justice."³⁰

With the coming of the Third and in the midst of sociality, the absolute asymmetry of responsibility and substitution is challenged. Even if it is Levinasianly clear that I am responsible for the other and all others and that I substitute myself for the other and no other can substitute for me, Levinas notes that the coming of the Third prompts a correction of the asymmetry of ethical proximity:

the relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at. There is weighing, thought, objectification and thus a decree in which my anarchic relationship with illeity is betrayed, but in which is conveyed before us. There is betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity, but also a new relationship with it.³¹

This anarchic relation with illeity (i.e., disruptive and epiphanic opportunity for ethical transcendence) is once again proven since it is always possible for others to be ethical subjects themselves, much so that I may be regarded as an other by the others—for myself. Levinas then exclaims, "thanks to God, I am an other for the others."³² In sociality, and by illeity, the neighbor that faced me and I looked after now presents oneself, "and there is also justice for me."³³ This idea opens the possibility for reciprocity, while maintaining asymmetry in ethical proximity, because even if my responsibility is never motivated by the response of the one that I helped, that other and many others are also in the face of their others, of which I may be a part.

It is from this maze of sociality where there is promise of a good Levinasian ethics of sustainability. I see the ethical promise of the Third as

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 159.

³³ *Ibid.*

the key to find a Levinasian idea of sustainability, either through the environment³⁴ or communal mechanisms of justice³⁵ and mutual giving.³⁶

A good articulation of the Third, as subject to human responsibility ushers the potential for them to also become a responsible third. This is when ethics can build politics where social justice becomes an effective prompt for all humans to also benefit from the goods of the earth. Van Roermund stretches this in classifying thirds to the Infinite Other, the Arbiter and the Polity as a plural self.³⁷ In all of these types, the third is taken to possibly portray a role in sustainability, with the first as a nonhuman subject and agent (with the environment well-kept as capable of caring for the humankind), second as the institutional subject that is ready to preserve and uphold social justice with full accountability, and third as individuals (i.e., of many responsible selves which are committed to serve and protect resources for the many others of the future). This view of the Third ushers the care of Thirds and the Thirds caring, where the environment is curated with respect, and social justice is implemented by an encouraging mechanism that does not only give back but more importantly pass acts of goodness to others.

Levinasian Ethics looking through the SDGs: Letting live, letting be, letting grow

And so let us return to the SDGs with a Levinasian reality check. We might as well ask how far have we been in our strife to achieve the goals?

³⁴ See Martin Betsan, "Taking Responsibility into all Matter: Engaging Levinas for the climate of the 21st century," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 48:4 (2016), 418–435, <DOI:10.1080/00131857.2015.1044927>; William Edelglass, James Hatley, and Christian Diehm (eds.), *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought*, (USA: Duquesne University Press, 2012); Michael Welsch, "From the Interpersonal to the Environmental: Extending the Ethics of Levinas to Human Ecology," *Human Ecology Review* 5:2 (1998): 49–57. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24707192>>; Eric S. Nelson, "Levinas and Adorno: Can there be an Ethics of Nature?," *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought* (USA: Duquesne University Press, 2012), 109–133; and Nino Antadze, "Who is the Other in the age of the Anthropocene? Introducing the Unknown Other in climate justice discourse," *The Anthropocene Review*, 6:1–2 (2019), 38–54.

³⁵ C. Groves, "Sustainability and the future: Reflections on the ethical and political significance of sustainability," *Sustainability Science*, 14 (2019), 915–924, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00700-0>>.

³⁶ Annabel Herzog, "Levinas on the Social: Guilt and the City," *Theory Culture and Society* (2014), <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414523479>>.

³⁷ Bert Van Roermund, "The Third Third: Levinas and 'We,'" in *Etica & Politica/Ethics & Politics*, XXIII:1 (Trieste: EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2021), 203–220, <<http://hdl.handle.net/10077/32029>>.

The United Nations' SDG Report of 2024 notes that nations are, "severely off track to realize the 2030 Agenda."³⁸ Out of 169 targets, 135 are assessable using global trend data, 34 lack sufficient data for global trend analysis. And within assessable targets, only 17 percent are projected to be achievable by 2030.³⁹

Challenges arise due to the economic disruption brought by COVID-19 and current geopolitical conflicts among some nations. For 2024, it has been noted that inequalities and climate crises continue to arise, biodiversity is destroyed, and the promotion of gender equality remains disputable.⁴⁰

In the UN SDG Report of 2024, SDGs 1, 2, and 10 are taking a toll with an additional 23 million people under extreme poverty, over 100 million people (1 in 10 people) suffering from hunger in 2022, and 7 in 10 children worldwide lack social protection coverage in 2023. With the slow per-capita GDP growth among nations, food prices increased four-fold (from years 2015-2019 to 2022); there are food crises (SDGs 2 and 12) that bring health setbacks (SDG 3), which is evidenced by stunting of 1 out of 5 children under age 5, 4.5 billion people not covered by health services (2021), and the increase of life expectancy.

Access to water, sanitation and energy (SDGs 6, 7) is under speed in development, with 2 billion people projected to still live without safe drinking water, 3 billion still without safely managed sanitation, 1.4 billion still without basic hygiene services, 660 million still without electricity access and 1.8 billion still without clean cooking fuels and technologies.⁴¹

Education (SDG 4) remains challenged, evidenced by the global decline of math and reading skills among students. There has been slow progress in upper secondary school completion from 1.3 percentage points (2010-2015) to 0.9 percentage points, with Oceania experiencing negative growth. This is brought about by problems in the educational system, lack of facilities, and the living conditions of the students. UN also reports that over 20 percent of primary schools lack clean sanitation facilities for girls.⁴²

Gender equality is slowly fostered with only 56 percent (among 69 countries) of married or in-union women aged 15-49 years old being capable of deciding on their own sexual and reproductive health, only 40 percent of women's hold of global employment and only 27.5 percent hold of

³⁸ United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*, <<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf>>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ United Nations. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 Key Findings* (2024), <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2024/SDGs_Report_Key_Findings_2024.pdf>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

managerial positions (2022). According to the same report, it is projected that the projected equality will need 176 more years to achieve.⁴³

Interestingly, the results reported by UN can also be cross-checked with the contemporary founts of knowledge which subjected the implementation of the SDGs in a critical check. In a 2019 study, Moyer and Hennen note that 43.2% of country indicators have already hit target values. Most rapid developments have been made in the areas of fighting extreme poverty, primary school completion, access to safe water and electricity. The slowest are in addressing underweight children, child mortality, completion of secondary education and safe sanitation. With a projected improvement only to 53.8% by 2023, this report generally implies that there is only limited progress in achieving the goals.⁴⁴

National Geographic also observed that limited progress has been made with the SDGs. Using the data reported by the UN, it reiterates that many people are now living healthier lives compared to the time when the MDGs and SDGs were introduced. This is evidenced by the rise in the percentage of the worldwide count of live births assisted by a skilled health professional from 62% from 2000 to 2005 to 80% from 2012 to 2017. There have also been improvements in poverty reduction, with a decrease of 1% by the year 2017 of the year 2015 global rate of 9.2% of workers with families to support making less than 1.90 USD. There also remains undernourishment which actually increased from 777 million people in 2015 to 800 million in 2018. Slow progress have also been stated about gender equality, with only Denmark showing progress in achieving the goals. This report observes that European countries are most capable of catching up with the SDGs, while those in the sub-Sahara are at the lowest. The overall score for all countries is 65.7, which is at a poor level.⁴⁵

Another study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2022 demonstrates a lack of progress, especially in poverty reduction, eliminating inequalities and exclusion, and narrowing the gender gap in wages. Inequities in education and unhealthy habits continue to deprive both youth and adults of acquiring basic skills to becoming “active, responsible and engaged citizens.”⁴⁶

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Jonathan D. Moyer and Steve Hedden. “Are we on the right path to achieve the sustainable development goals?” *World Development*, 127 (2020), <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104749>>.

⁴⁵ National Geographic, “Sustainable Development Goals,” *National Geographic Website*, <<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/sustainable-development-goals/>>.

⁴⁶ OECD, *The Short and Winding Road to 2030: Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets*, OECD Publishing, Paris, (2022) <<https://doi.org/10.1787/af4b630d-en>>.

With the above, OECD countries (mostly European) still need to work more to meet 21 targets by 2030, and that it remains impossible for the targets due by 2020 to be achieved by all these member countries.

If the reports, both by the UN and other institutions, spanning from 2019 to 2024, our general reading should consider the rise, fall and restoration of the world economy and quality of life brought about by COVID. Before and after COVID, it is evident that arriving at the goals of 2030 is taking its toll. In its report, UN recognizes that we are far from the goals, and there needs to promote peace, solidary and implementation of direct measures to catch up. Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) suggests that the SDG agenda should be extended to 2050 in order to ensure proper financing, reinforce international peace and security, harness science, empower youth, enhance global governance.⁴⁷

Reaching the goals certainly needs more time. The general principles set by the United Nations provide careful stipulations about the principles and provisions for evaluation, as well as strategies for funding. This calls for meticulous mindwork involving diplomacy and policy making, which are implemented in the underlying units, such as governments and private sectors. As it lacks legal binding, it remains a guiding principle, with the mandate merely depending on the law-making powers of states. UN operates on the level of providing guideposts and support, and Levinasianly, is an arbiter for this environmental and social justice. Yet, the role of justice must supersede the rhetoric of systems. While the precise indices graphically represent the movement in achieving the 2030 goals, what remains unanswered is the question about its relevance to addressing the many thirds. Are the 2030 goals truly geared to provide for the people of the future? If today's progress is insufficient to address the needs of the others of our times, could we truly guarantee that we will achieve the same goals for those beyond the present? Finally, with all these data that describe the development, in what ways can such quantification offer approaches to be responsible and just to the people and the planet?

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, we find Levinas constantly reminding us about the possibility of overriding the mechanisms of justice in case it loses itself in the middle of the operative structures it created. Levinas supplements this with a note: justice "must not be taken for an anonymous law of the 'human forces' governing an impersonal totality."⁴⁸ For Levinas,

⁴⁷ Yuki Kimura, "UN Sustainable Development Report 2024," *Global Society World News* (19 June 2024), <[⁴⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis \(Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009\), 161.](https://www.globalsociety.earth/post/un-sustainable-development-report-2024?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwpbi4BhByEiwAMC8JnfHRL-nPjNl5Y_tBTrFmtLKC-1bPGZJvGAXcku_zS16e4XukVaXK5RoCw6UQAvD_BwE.>></p>
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the measures of justice should resist the assemblage of fixtures because it should always be dis-inter-ested:

In no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial double would become a trio. But the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the distinction of two: justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest. The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights. The forgetting of the self moves justice.⁴⁹

The ethical space must keep its enigmatic ambivalence so it may always resist the enchainment of the Infinite and transcendent and keep within ethical responsibility the possibility of being a gift. Sustainability then means finding creative means to be able to keep others, and if within the socio-political sphere, that means finding the “wisdom of love at the service of love.”⁵⁰

Arbitrations of justice should have a dynamic mechanism that is capable of putting itself into question, as systems are by themselves thematizations that hamper the natural act of letting live and letting be—letting grow. While this strife for universal prosperity is industrially driven, we throw the real question on whether these goals truly cascade to the grassroots in recognition of their culture, lifeworld, livelihood and even human rights. The strife towards the SDGs must remain true in protecting alterities, such as the identities and welfare of the indigenous, the dignity of the poor, and the rights of women and children, to name a few.

Finally, the call for sustainability which covers both environmental and social justice is a disruption of the enjoyment of consuming things in a place. It heralds otherness that should be respected in the midst of development, since the subject shares this rooted place of implements with others. If at all the good life is a sincere human concern that goes beyond the Self, sustainability should be understood within the context of sharing this planet not only with the others that we have now, but also with those of the future. Sustainability becomes an ethical expression through respect that puts aside self-interest for the Other and all others, including that non-human

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

other that it may also provide for the future others. This calls for an acquired sense of social justice and of a shared world.

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