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Deep Sustainability as Care: A Nondual Approach to Environmental Communication

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests the concept of “deep sustainability” as a philosophical orientation for environmental communication scholars to address not only the empirical but also the ethical and ontological questions associated with sustainability. Drawing on the thoughts of deep ecology and founded in a nondual ontology with origins in perennial wisdom, it argues that in order to create a counterculture to the uncaring neoliberal order, there is a need to substantially increase awareness of the devastating implications of the dualistic discourse inherent to this order. What is required is a new and radically different worldview of “interbeing,” rooted in the lived experience of the interconnectedness – oneness – of all life. Extending research in the study of sustainability discourse, this essay contends that it is only when our identity in-group becomes all-inclusive, that is, when duality dissolves, that caring for all beings, be they humans, trees, animals, or other lifeforms, comes effortlessly and with deep – lasting – sustainability as the natural result.

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It is true that we live in a “world-in-crisis,” where human-made environmental catastrophes multiply and relentlessly push human society into what seems to be its endgame (Cottle, 2023). The more humanity insists on doing business-as-usual under the neoliberal regime, even with an alleged “green” twist to it, the worse – and exceedingly more unpredictable – the disasters tend to unfold. It is tempting, to say the least, to give in to despair, emotional fatigue, and apathy or to coping strategies such as climate denial, conspiratorial thinking, or plain cynicism. Being open-hearted and compassionate simply become increasingly difficult because it is also true that the more we care about the beings of the world, the more it hurts; it feels as if we are living in a “world of wounds” (Lent, 2021, p. 281).

But there is still room and reason for hope. Not hope in the form of an ill-founded optimism that in some miraculous way everything will work out fine, but hope based on the acknowledgment of the *interconnectedness* of all life. This kind of hope entails the rise of an ecological civilization that would lead the way out of the destructive Anthropocene into the much-needed Symbiocene (Lent, 2021). But for this hope to take root, the fundamental understanding of *oneness* needs to saturate every aspect of human (in)action (Olausson, 2023).

To this end and drawing on the philosophy of deep ecology (e.g. Cronon, 1996; Macy, 2021; Naess, 2016), I elaborate here on the emerging idea of *deep sustainability* (e.g. Buriti, 2019; Martin, 2020) in an attempt to conceptualize what I see as the fundamental requirement of an integral sustainability that actually lasts (Olausson, 2023; Olausson, *forthcoming*). Deep ecology broadly might

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be understood as a philosophical and ecological perspective that advocates for a fundamental shift in how humans relate to the natural world. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and aims to address the root causes of environmental issues by fostering a deeper sense of responsibility and respect for the Earth's ecosystems. Deep sustainability adds to this perspective the direct conceptual linkage to overall sustainability discourse as well as the explicit ontological fundaments of perennial “nondual” wisdom – a worldview of *lived interbeing*. Because when the seamless web of life becomes evident, not primarily through an intellectual understanding but through *direct experience*, it is no longer possible to behave in unsustainable ways. As Eisenstein (2022) suggests in a talk, it then becomes obvious that when harm is done to even a single one of the myriad of constituents that form the indivisible whole of which we all are part, the consequences are universal: “When I understand that my very existence at its core is part of the existence of each ecosystem and species around the world, then I know that whatever happens to them is in a way happening to me.”

Thus, in order to create a counterculture to the uncaring neoliberal order, there is a need to substantially increase awareness of the devastating effects of the dualistic discourse that is inherent to this order. In other words, to make visible the tendency to interpret and communicate the world in terms of dichotomies such as nature-culture, human-animal, us-them, all of which create an illusory sense of separation and form the cognitive-discursive justification of the continuous struggle against or exploitation of the “other.”

Deep sustainability entails a radical transformation – indeed, a paradigm shift (Lent, 2021) – in human consciousness toward *nonduality* (e.g. Spira, 2017), that is, the recognition that All is One. The ontological assumption of nonduality forms the backbone of perennial philosophy (Huxley, 1945/2009) and is the main message of a great deal of the world's wisdom traditions, for instance, in the ancient Indian texts of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, in the Chinese *Tao Te Ching*, and in the biocentric perspectives of indigenous peoples (Milstein, 2008). The fact that Alain Aspect, John Clauser, and Anton Zeilinger were rewarded the 2022 Nobel Prize in physics due to their groundbreaking research on quantum entanglement, only testifies to the validity of what has been known for a very very long time among such various and geographically dispersed wisdom traditions.

Obviously, the nondual ontology and its origins in traditional wisdom rather than scientific knowledge may sound both misplaced and controversial in the academic context. But when all other measures, including the outcomes of science, seem to be failing sustainability, we need to look beyond our taken-for-granted assumptions of a world constituted by oppositional and separate phenomena as well as beyond the traditional academic canon. There is an immense amount of wisdom available in the world with a largely unexplored potential to reveal the very foundation of our sustainability problems (Lent, 2021; Macy, 2021; Olausson, 2023; Wilber, 2000).

An obvious first step for this philosophical orientation to take empirical root would be to investigate how (non)duality shapes sustainability discourse itself. Recent research suggests, for example, that The UN's Agenda 2030 with its 17 global sustainability goals (SDGs) does not only lack communication perspectives but also the fundamental acknowledgement of interconnectedness, feeding into the ideology of anthropocentrism (Kopnina 2019; Martin 2020). Overall, the ontological outlook of nonduality would open new paths for ideology critical research of discursive “otherization” with its integral take on our shared existence. It provides communication scholars with a firm foundation to anchor the argument that duality and polarization in various discursive contexts not only come with harmful sustainability consequences, but that they in fact are entirely untrue.

In sum, finding solutions to the grave sustainability challenges caused by the exploitative human culture and its destructive and uncaring economic system requires a profound reassessment of the “nature we carry inside our heads” (Cronon, 1996, p. 22).

If we want to steer our civilization on another course ... it's not enough to make a few incremental improvements here and there. We need to take a long hard look at the faulty ideas that have brought us to this place and reimagine them. We need a new worldview – one that is based on sturdy foundations. (Lent, 2021, p. 4)

In this transformational process, I suggest that the concept of deep sustainability provides environmental communication scholars with a platform to explore more deeply not only the empirical but also the ethical-philosophical questions associated with sustainability (Olausson, 2023; Olausson, forthcoming).

The identity problem

Among all dualisms, the one between nature and culture has received the most attention in the research field of environmental communication (e.g. Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013; Cronon, 1996; Olausson & Uggla, 2021; Pezzullo, 2007). In short, this widespread dualism involves the notion that *nature is where humans are not* (Olausson, 2020). The thought figure that humanity is external to nature is discursively reproduced and nature turned into a distant “other.”

This does not mean, however, that there is no variety in *how* the relationship is represented. Sometimes nature is portrayed as subordinate to humanity and their needs; nature then becomes the object to master and exploit in service of humanity – the subject (Uggla & Olausson, 2013), whereas at other times it is depicted as superior to human culture and assigned the role as active subject, which means that nature must be feared, obeyed, and served by humanity – the object (Olausson & Uggla, 2021). Thus, the nature-culture dualism prevails regardless of whether the argument is to serve nature or to exploit it (Pollan, 1991).

For, of course, to speak of man [*sic*] intervening in natural processes is to suppose that he might find it possible not to do so, or to decide not to do so. Nature has to be thought of... as separate from man, before any question of intervention or command ... can arise. (Williams, 2005, p. 76)

Elsewhere (Olausson, 2023; Olausson, forthcoming), I have argued that the nature-culture dualism is an excellent example of how duality forms a tyrannical (and ideological) structure of thought and language. It keeps us fettered in existential separation and prevents us from perceiving and experiencing the seamless whole that humanity form together with so many other lifeforms. The risk is obvious that if we do not (re)turn attention to the interconnectedness of all life, it will not be possible to solve the global mega-problems we are facing for good. Deep sustainability will stay out of reach, as it were.

To further develop this line of thought, deep sustainability is basically a matter of *identity growth* in terms of taking another – and indispensable – evolutionary step as human beings, so that our perceived collective identity is no longer dependent on the formation of an out-group, that is, on the construction of the “other” (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Olausson, 2005). Because it is only when nature becomes part of our identity in-group – when duality dissolves – that caring for all lifeforms comes effortlessly.

The ecological crisis – or Gaia’s main problem – is not pollution, toxic dumping, ozone depletion, or any such. Gaia’s main problem is that not enough human beings have developed to the postconventional, worldcentric, global levels of consciousness, wherein they will automatically be moved to care for the global commons. (Wilber 2000, p. 137)

Thus, a prerequisite for deep sustainability to emerge is that the anthropocentric identity figure of thought and language and the interrelated dualistic relationship between nature and culture erode. The experience of intimate interconnection with all lifeforms presupposes the profound recognition that we live in a more-than-human world (Abram, 1997) in which human and non-human lifeforms exist on perfectly equal terms.

The deep-going effect not only on environmental but also on social sustainability is a logical consequence of the evolutionary identity shift toward nonduality. Partly, because Abram (1997) probably has a strong point when suggesting that the ongoing devastation of non-human environments and the extinction of non-human lifeforms are also cause of the division, disharmony, and lack of trust in human relationships. Partly, because social sustainability is driven by a vibrant and inclusive democracy, where issues of identity are crucial. From the perspective of radical democracy, for

example, Mouffe (2005) argues that identity struggles and communicative conflicts are defining elements of a well-functioning democracy because at the very moment consensus seems to have been reached, there is always some, less resourceful, identity group that has been oppressed.

The conflict perspective on democracy as well as the assumption that identity is contingent are entirely valid at this point in time, when differentiation toward the “others” seems to be necessary in order to shape and establish our contextually determined in-groups (Olausson, 2005). However, along with the expansion of consciousness toward nonduality, we might discover our essential identity, which is shared by all beings, and, in turn, treat all lifeforms – including those in human form – with respect and care. We then begin to realize, and above all experience, that all are perfect manifestations of the same web of life as we belong to, with profound effects on democracy as a result.

The pre-conceptual identity

When talking to people about nonduality (scholars and laypersons alike), I usually meet a bit of resistance: “Hey, this is the foundation of language – it’s built on duality, and as soon as we communicate, it manifests – how can we possibly cope without dualisms?” This question is entirely valid and could be approached from at least two angles, the first originating from critical theory, which is a familiar strand within communication research and emphasizes the dialectical relationship between language and society. This means that, on the one hand, language nurtures separating structures such as the nature-culture dualism, as communication on “autopilot” often does. But, on the other hand, communication has the amazing potential to contribute to change. In the same way that language and communication are shaped by society and culture, they too can be revitalized and transformed by communication (Fairclough, 1995). However, for this potential to realize – for us to be able to influence structures that chain our thinking and communication in inert and dualistic norms – those elements of our language that we perhaps take the most for granted must be “denaturalized” (Machin & Mayr, 2012). When we become aware of the discursive nature-culture rift, as the topical case in point, we simply do not have to take it as a natural given anymore.

Elsewhere (Olausson, 2023; Olausson, *forthcoming*), I have suggested that in order to facilitate denaturalization of the nature-culture dualism, its dissolution could be integrated on a deeper and more intuitive, even spiritual, level. This leads to the second angle from which voices sceptical of the realization of nonduality could be met. The answer is: Clear your head of concepts because they obstruct access to the wordless web of life! By letting naming be – when not defining an object with a specific linguistic sign – we can open to an experience of union that transgresses seeming boundaries. Intercultural studies of discourse have shown that the very absence of human communication and naming is crucial for the experience of connection with nature. Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi (2011, p. 114), for example, describe this state of nonduality as “an expressive coexistence with nature, albeit one of an unnamable kind.” Further, according to Milstein (2008), any attempt to verbally reproduce such deeply meaningful “humanature” experiences actually becomes a verbal encapsulation of the experience, which leads to a separation from the nature aspect we are trying to conceptualize.

Hence, a genuine experience of interconnectedness between different lifeforms cannot be obtained through the crude communication tools we have access to through language, and when we try to conceptualize experiences of interbeing, the effect is often the opposite, namely a reproduction of duality. But when communing wordlessly, we simply let go of the anthropocentric identity and instead embrace an identity on the pre-conceptual level. The requirement for this sense of interconnection to happen is “to preserve the silence within – amid all the noise. To remain open and quiet, a moist humus in the fertile darkness where the rain falls and the grain ripens,” as eloquently put by Hammarskjöld (1964, p. 70). Emptying the mind of the almost obsessive stream of thoughts takes some practicing. Music, art, poetry, literature are all excellent means to practice the

stillness within, as are dwelling in nature, yoga, and meditation. “Yoga” (which is a complete philosophy) literally means “to unite,” and when tuning into the inner silence, we unite with the shared essence of all beings.¹ This sense of flow and timelessness thus occurs when we are fully immersed in the present moment, feeling a sense of focused concentration, enjoyment, and a loss of awareness of the separate self.

In sum, the moment we know that “both the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*” (Abram, 1997, p. 67, italics in original), duality spontaneously and effortlessly collapses. The interconnectedness of everything becomes evident through all-encompassing experience, completely different from conceptual understanding, and when duality dissolves, there will be no “others” – be they humans, trees, animals, or other lifeforms – to fight, exploit, destroy or even care for, and deep sustainability will come naturally.

Note

1. For a more elaborate discussion on this and the ethical implications of deep sustainability, see Olausson (2023).

Disclosure statement

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