

Chapter 3

Alternative Paradigms for Sustainability: Decentring the Human Without Becoming Posthuman

Paul James

Introduction

In the emerging realisation of the precariousness of the human condition an increasing urgency surrounds discussions of sustainability. Much of this urgency centres on attempts to find alternative paradigms for life on this planet. The dominant developmental paradigm currently assumes the centrality of modern, human-centred, market-driven, economic growth as the basis of human flourishing, marginally offset by ameliorative efforts to take the environment into account. Responses swirl through public discourse and practice. This chapter addresses two such alternative paradigms. The first is posthumanism, coming out of a critical postmodernism mixed with a new materialities discourse. The second is the Triple Bottom Line approach, much more conventional—hardly a paradigm break at all. Both these alternatives, it is argued, are flawed. They both leave the dominant paradigm largely intact—the first because it caricatures what it is criticising and then *allows* a posthuman future of disassembled, fragmented, and technologised bodies/minds to become part of its contradictory alternative; the second because, in its utter pragmatism, it fails to actually challenge what should be the object of its critique: human-centred development based on the single bottom-line of profit. The essay introduces a further alternative, the Circles of Social Life approach, as one of a number of potentially viable ways of thinking through basic tensions.

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Of Children's Games and Serious Concerns

An ecological child's game emerged in the age of intensifying globalisation, at least for those who travelled between hemispheres. Which direction would the water swirl as it formed a vortex at the plughole? Children and their parents—or perhaps mostly parents without their children—would arrive at a foreign hotel and immediately test the waters. They were looking for the Coriolis force, linking their plughole to the rotation of the Earth. Science, myth, and wrong-headed common sense became mixed up together. Many of us in the West grew up with this false intrigue. Murray Bail's (1980) novel *Homesickness* describes a museum on the equator in Ecuador displaying a bathtub on rails, used to show how if the bath is moved back and forth across the equator the water vortex changes direction. The phenomenon was featured in Michael Palin's *Pole to Pole* television series (James, Mills, & Vallance, 1992). The reality, however, is that water does not go down plugholes in different directions according to which hemisphere one takes a bath. This myth of the vortex and the plughole provides an analogy for talking about something very serious.

These are precarious times. There is no doubt that we need to rethink the current paradigms of sustainability. The world is in crisis, and in response some academic critics and theorists are turning to dramatic counter-positions. The present essay explores two seemingly unconnected contestations of mainstream understandings: the first is the posthumanist critique of the centring of the human, and the second is the Triple Bottom Line critique of the centring of economic profit. To extend the plughole metaphor, each of these contestations takes a complex phenomenon—the Coriolis effect, the human/nature relation, the domain of the economic—and, first, turns it into an all-embracing condition; second, translates it into a game that overlooks problems of spiralling illogicality; and, third, allows the main game of modernising and exploiting the planet to race on without being substantially challenged. In response to these three gamings, the essay concludes by suggesting an alternative approach.

There are some wonderful critical discussions of the vexed historical lineages of humanism (e.g. Kay Anderson, 2007). In parallel there are some excellent discussions of the materialities of things such as waste (Hawkins, 2006) and water (Weir, 2009); and there are nuanced discussions of vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010). Accordingly, this essay does feel the need to criticise the weaknesses of classical humanism. The essay is rather directed to the critique of its alternatives in order to find a viable way of recognising that the condition of the Anthropocene is embedded in the nature of how we live and think now, not primarily in the presuppositions of a few posthumanist philosophers or some putative problem with dualism.

The Problem with Posthumanism

Problem One. The Term ‘Posthuman’ Gives the Impression that It Advocates a Time After—or Post—the Human

In the context of the Anthropocene, decentering the priority of human needs over the limits of planet is a priority. It is important to shift our theoretical perspective so that we can write from the perspective of both human others and nonhuman others. And there are good reasons to criticise understandings of the relation between humans and nonhumans as one of dominion, mastery, resource management, or even modern humanitarian care.¹ Proponents of the posthuman approach seek to respond to these major issues, but a core conceptual problem with that approach, despite its apparent radicalism, is that its critique either ends up reproducing the condition of which it is critical or alternatively it slips into a vortex of disclaimers that lead to internal contradictions.

Alongside conceptual contradiction, the key political problem is that, in effect, the position allows the human as a *category of being* to flow down the plughole of history. This is ontologically critical. Unlike the naming of ‘postmodernism’ where the ‘post’ does not infer the end of what it previously meant to be human (just the passing of the dominance of the modern) the posthumanists are playing a serious game where *the human*, in all its ontological variability, disappears in the name of saving something unspecified about us as merely a motley co-location of individuals and communities. If the ‘post’ means ‘after’, what happens for example to the many customary peoples across human history, beginning long before the humanists, who do not dominate nature, and treat matter as vital and life-forces as multiple? For customary and tribal communities, matter moves between being inanimate and sacred depending upon the season or place. For them, life-forces include their dead human ancestors who have a continuing presence among the living (Grenfell, 2012). These communities are not humanists. They have lived before, during and after the classical humanists of the Enlightenment. Some of the posthumanists respond that this conceptual problem can be bypassed. And thus posthumanism, despite the usual meaning of the prefix ‘post’, is redefined to mean after, before, and during. Hence, we arrive at Problem Two.

Problem Two: Posthumanism Is Conceptually Confusing

In response to Problem One, Cary Wolfe (2010) says that his sense of posthumanism is comfortable with a multi-temporal redefinition:

¹It should be acknowledged that many modern humanists have been also arguing along the same lines.

[P]osthumanism is thus analogous to Jean-Francois Lyotard's rendering of the postmodern: it comes both before and after humanism; before in the sense that it names the embodiment and the embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world ... all of which comes before that historically specific thing called the 'human' that Foucault's archaeology excavates ... But it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is impossible to ignore, a historical development that points towards the necessity of a new theoretical paradigm (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought after the cultural repressions and fantasies ... of humanism (2010, pp. xv–xvi).

Lyotard did not actually argue what Cary Wolfe attributes to him, but leaving that aside, Wolfe links this confusing passage to another point made on the same page that moves in a contrary direction: “posthumanism ... isn't posthuman at all” (2010, p. xv), he says. Read this point in relation to the above quote—“posthumanism names a historical moment”—and see if it helps you understand what he is saying. The issues are real and the quandaries are complex (a critique of the version of humanism that advocates hubris is necessary), but to have *posthumanism*, the approach, naming two distinct conditions as posthuman, one before and one after humanism, and then claim that it is not implicated in either, but is evoked by the latter, is a spiralling vortex of confusion. My attempt here is to drive home the political and conceptual consequences of the position, not to focus on the philosophical or literary issues.² It is certainly not enough, as some ‘critical posthumanists’ respond, to simply label all those posthumanists they do not like as transhumanists.

Problem Three: The Posthumanist Critique of Dualism Is Thin and Misdirected

Posthumanism, for all its variability, has at its core an abiding revulsion of Cartesian dualism. Dualist thinking is taken to be the essence of the modern and the humanist—namely, that we divide the world into a series of oppositions: us/them, human/unhuman, being/matter, mind/body, active/passive. The trouble with this argument is that as a blanket statement it is both conceptually and empirically wrong. Certainly there are strands of modernism and humanism that do just that—fetishise dualisms—but there are also strands of modernism and humanism that are very different. This relates to the first gaming listed above—turning what it is criticising into an all-embracing condition rather than just a tendency.

Conceptually, if those posthumanists who associate Descartes with dualism had read him carefully they would not find the proclaimed simple dualisms of mind versus body. Rather Descartes begins a thought experiment that turns upon relational claims about the *embodied mind* (Descartes, 1637/1998). There is a

²Anthony Miccoli (2010) has already provided a strong critique of posthumanism that develops that line of response.

considerable revisionist literature that fundamentally challenges this posthumanist caricature (Baker & Morris, 2005; de Rosa, 2010). To be sure, Descartes requires concepts that make distinctions—such as ‘mind’ and ‘body’ but he is not a simple divider of mind and body or human and animal. The posthumanist Alyce Miller (2015), for example, wrongly writes that “it is well known that Descartes did not believe that animals actually felt pain” (2015, p. 107). What he actually says is that animals feel pain just as humans feel pain, but they do not ‘suffer’ in the meta-sense because there is no rational *cogito* to do the *suffering*. Whether or not that is empirically true is not the issue here. The issue is that posthumanists tend to criticise the classical humanists based on a series of tropes taken out of context. ‘Man is the measure of all things’ and Leonardo’s Vitruvian man are their favourite examples.

Problem Four: Some Posthumanists Anthropomorphise the Very World that They Treat as Beyond the Human

The concept of nonhuman ‘actants’ is quite useful (even if it problematically continues defines the world in terms of the human), and some of the new materialism is innovative and thoughtful.³ However, for some posthumanists, matter is “intelligent and self-organising” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 35). Think for a moment about the anthropomorphism involved in such a claim. It involves a crude expansion of human qualities that even most humanists would understand as being a problem. One of the ironies here is that Descartes was, in one reading, a traditional-modern vitalist. Descartes uses the vibrant materiality of the pineal gland as the centre of the embodied mind. In a double irony, one posthumanist even uses a phrase that sounds vaguely Cartesian: “people become posthuman because they think that they are posthuman” (Hayles, 1999, p. 6), and all of this while contradictorily suggesting that the mind is only a “sideshow” to the body (pp. 2–3). This is just an unhelpful reversal. It is not good theory.

Problem Five: Having Damned Dualism, the Posthumanists Themselves Use Unacknowledged Dualisms

The irony is that posthumanists themselves continue to use the same distinctions of mind and body, human and animal as those they criticise, while, in some cases, simultaneously saying that we cannot use terms such as the ‘body’ anymore. ‘The body’, for one posthumanist now in inverted commas, becomes “a virtuality ... a virtual, multidimensional space produced and stabilised by the recursive enactions

³Here I am thinking of Jane Bennett (2010). Her work is often taken out of context. Quite distinct from most posthumanists, she is clear that she is talking about encounters between ontologically diverse actants, some human, some not (p. xiv).

Table 3.1 The dualisms of the critics of dualism^a

| | |
|-------------|-----------------|
| Human | Posthuman |
| Modern | Amodern |
| Dualist | Non-dualist |
| Singular | Multiple |
| Monist | Vital |
| Purpose | Play |
| Root/depth | Rhizome/surface |
| Determinacy | Indeterminacy |

^aThis table recalls Ihab Hassan’s famous modernism/postmodernism table (1985). It should be noted that earlier in the same essay as the table, Hassan says that modernism and postmodernism “are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest” (p. 121)

and structural couplings of autopoietic beings” (Wolfe, 2010, p. xxiii). Try saying that to your children when you are suggesting that they should wash while taking a bath. I am not here criticising the use of complex technical language or conceptual elaborations of a common-sense term, but in this case the author is suggesting that the term ‘body’ needs practically to be treated as a virtuality. That is deeply problematic. What do some posthumanists say of those children in the bath who do not want to wash themselves? To paraphrase: Please attend to the bottom half of your recursive enactions and structural couplings? Or to paraphrase Katherine Hayles: their play agent wants to stay in the bath, while their resistance agent refuses to respond to parental desires; and all the while a water agent is washing them clean just by them being there (1999, p. 6).⁴ This is neither good nor paradigm-shifting theory. It is just an awkward way of saying that in any situation there are multiple determinations, and there are intended and unintended consequences—something that critical theorists, including humanist critical theorists, have been saying for a long time.

Most of the posthumanists repeat the now classical process of setting up an implicit dualistic schema to criticise those terrible dualists. In other words, the posthumanist critique of the humanists for being dualists sets up false duality between the posthumanists and the humanists (see Table 3.1).

In practice, many modernists and certain strands of human-centred critique range across that divide in different ways. “No problem”, say some of the posthumanists.

⁴Hayles is an interesting figure in the posthumanist tradition because she is a critic of the cybernetic posthuman condition, while succumbing to the posthuman inevitability herself, saying she wants the kind of posthumanism which enhances embodiment: “my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognises and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival” (1999, p. 5). I agree with all of that, except for the claim that what she is describing is a *post*human condition.

“Those apparent humanist critics are actually posthumanists too”. And so Nietzsche, Thoreau, Darwin, Bergson, Fanon, Gilroy, and Shiva all become posthumanists, even though none of them have ever used the concept. Even Martha Nussbaum, an avowed humanist, becomes for Rosi Braidotti (2013, pp. 38–39) a reactive or negative posthumanist, and then, in what I think is simply a crass act of bad faith, Nussbaum is criticised for being a bad posthumanist, something she never claims for herself in the first place.

The difference between the Cartesians and the posthumanists is not that one uses dualisms and the other does not. It is the way in which they manage ontological questions. The so-called humanist, Descartes, for example, has vortex theory of weight and matter with the sun at the centre of a spiral of planets. But he does this without going down the plughole. For all of his mechanism, he is consistent in bringing science and human life together. By comparison, key posthumanists swirl around the science plughole, sometimes drawing upon modern science, sometimes celebrating the hybrid productions of science, sometimes expressing concern that techno-science is disembodimenting us, and sometimes relativising science through a postmodern turn. Take your pick; there must be something in that collection of posthumanist dispositions that is politically appealing.

Problem Six: The Politics of Posthumanism Is Ungrounded

And so we get to the practical projective question of what posthumanists actually espouse. Here it gets even more confusing. Different posthumanists go in very different directions, and some want to circle the vortex both ways at the same time. In the words of one writer, posthumanism—like humanism—promises a return to the Garden of Eden:

A posthuman future is in some ways the logical completion and fulfillment of the modern, humanist project—as its utopian promise. It is more than a bit ironic that humanistic utopias have been slightly revised versions of Western culture’s myth of origins, the Garden of Eden, where humans supposedly lived as animals in the natural world, nonalienated from other animals and their ‘species being’ ... That is, the return to the garden that is the promise of posthumanism, like all utopias, provides us with only a general direction for an evolutionary development of culture. It is a pragmatic teleology that provides a promise and a vision that must then be translated into pragmatic agendas and movements for change (Carlson, 2015, p. xv).

This invocation of the humanist utopias as the basis of a posthuman politics is simply twisted. Here, the future politics of *posthumanism* circles back to a prior condition, akin to the modernist utopia of the post-Garden of Eden before the Fall, only much, much better. Incidentally by recognising the embedded form of humanist utopias, this passage contradicts all claims, including those later in the same volume, which suggest that all humanists sets up dualist divisions between humans and animals.

A few pages later, the editors of the volume make the task even more difficult. In their Introduction they give up on the task of political projection, even before the book gets going. “Given our saturation in humanism”, they say, “it is not even remotely possible at the present moment to conceptually or practically lay out a theory of posthumanist education or outline the contours of a posthumanist pedagogy” (Snaza & Weaver, 2015, p. 4). Common to all the posthumanist texts I’ve read, all that we are left with is a series of unspecified evocations (see for example, Snaza et al., 2014, Lloro-Bidart, Teresa, 2015): humanism is bad; posthumanism is the only way forward by going backward and forward, and taking the good stuff and not the bad.

All of this means that the posthumanists leave behind modernist approaches to environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) without being able to put much in its place, except a change of rhetoric and a rhetoric for change. As Phillip Payne astutely concludes in working his way through the absences and silences in environmental education:

It is remarkable that the term ‘conservation’ has all but disappeared from the discourses of EE and ESD, mindful of the (Western) history of the field where EE was preceded by ‘conservation education’ and, before that, ‘nature study’ (2016, p. 174).

In other words, the posthumanists present their work as a spiral of conflicting and even contradictory contentions that only loosely fit together: (1) posthumanism will bring about an amazing new post-dualist world; (2) we are already posthuman; and (3) humanism remains *the* problem because it remains dominant. And all without providing an alternative grounding of the human condition, including its embeddedness in and dependence upon nature.

In short, most of the politics of the posthumanists remains empty aspirational. For example, the recent anthology *Posthumanism and Educational Research* begins with a typical posthumanist refrain:

We live in an age in which democratic progressive cultural politics is very much about deconstructing the binary oppositions that have governed the construction of power relations of inequality and ‘otherness’ in the modern era (Carlson, 2015, p. ix).

Here, the author projects the aspirational politics of the posthumanist approach onto the world. For him the world is already posthuman, or nearly so. Unfortunately, he does not describe the world that I know where considerable empirical evidence suggests increasing inequalities and uneven but intensifying ethnocentrism in relation to the Other. At the same time, without even recognizing a problem with the term, he uses the modernist notion of being ‘progressive’, as if this temporal loading will take us somewhere good.

Empirically, the posthumanists thus do not fare much better than they do conceptually. The posthumanist approach is wrong, for example, to the extent that it makes the claim that one of the key problems with the modern humanist period has been that it gives no agency to objects and systems. To the contrary, the humanist modern world (treating this characterisation of the world as humanist as uneven and contradictory) is very mixed in this regard. Many examples could be used to quickly qualify the posthumanist overstatement, but there is one allows us to segue into

our second contestation example, the Triple Bottom Line. This example is the stock market.

Contrary to the posthumanist claim that humanists do not understand the agency of things, the market is often described by humanist critics and cyborg proponents alike as working without or beyond human agency. Typically, *the* market anticipates events, responds to fluttering butterfly wings, and determines outcomes. As expressed in one unremarkable description on one stock-exchange website: “The particular market phase determines the type of action that may be taken for an order on ASX Trade, which in turn affects how trading is conducted” (Australian Stock Exchange, 2015). This determining, acting, and thinking market—of shares, bulls, trading pits, and bears—is projected in popular culture and politics through a media fascination that tracks transactions as animated matter. The most powerful of these things is called ‘Wall Street’. It is a physical thing, treated more as a hypostatised and vital entity than as a pattern of structured practices. Wall Street does this, and Wall Street says that. ‘Wall Street’ even gives animal names to categories of humans: “If the masses are bullish, *Wall Street says* anyone who is a contrarian is bearish” (Fisher & Dellinger, 2015, p. 4). While *the* market has been given an attributed energy since the nineteenth century, from the latter part of the twentieth century we have even been increasingly asked to listen to the market (Barabba & Zaltman, 1991).

The Trouble with the Triple Bottom Line

The intentional force given to the phrase ‘Wall Street says’ points to a second contestation. It concerns the question, how much emphasis should be given to the economy in making decisions about what is to be done locally and globally? In most mainstream analysis the economy is given primary emphasis, qualified somewhat by a series of trade-offs with the environment. Here ‘the economy’ is now nearly always preceded either by the definite article ‘the’ or a deictic qualifier such as ‘our’. It has come to be treated as *the* centre of flourishing human-life on this planet. Too many commentators and critics have forgotten, or did not know in the first place, that until very recently economics was an embedded relation within a much more integrated understanding of the human condition. Economics was linked to the concept of ‘ecology’ through their common root in the Ancient Greek understanding of household or family relations—*eco* or *oikos*, the basic unit of the social relations for the Greeks.

The contemporary concept of ‘the economy’, with the ‘the’ now sitting proudly to the fore, first began to be used with regularity in the twentieth century. Writing in the eighteenth century, even Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, did not use this lexical form. Because economic commentators today rarely grapple with his original passions—and because economic history has largely been subsumed into business studies—they fail to recognise that books such as the *Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776) use very different concepts from ‘the economy’. When Smith does use the term ‘economy’, it is either as ‘political economy’, the science of the sys-

tems of commerce and agriculture as Karl Marx would have used it, or as ‘good economy’, meaning being economical, frugal, and careful in management. That is the last thing that the horsemen of the Global Financial Crisis want to hear. It is certainly not what Wall Street is telling them.

The Triple Bottom Line approach was developed as a well-intentioned attempt to decentre the economy. Phrases such as “It’s the economy, stupid”, from Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign, attested to this centring. The alternative metaphor of the Triple Bottom Line, usually attributed to John Elkington (1997), added two more bottom lines to the profit-line: *the* environment line and *the* social line. There are, however, so many problems with this metaphor that it is hard to know where to begin. I have only space for two urgent points of critique.

Problem One: The Triple Bottom Line Approach Leaves Capitalism Basically Unchallenged

From the beginning, it was if the voracious domination of capitalism was taken as given and largely unchangeable. John Elkington’s metaphoric TBL fork with three prongs is, in his terms, to be given to cannibals in a world where devouring the opposition is the natural order of things (1997, p. vii). In other words, all that the TBL approach was intended to do was marginally civilise capitalism—add some elements of table etiquette. Thus, for all of Elkington’s (1997) radical concern for ecosystems thinking, the metaphor of ‘cannibals with forks’ exposes the basic problem almost immediately. And once exposed the critique comes quickly: marginally tempering voracious self-consumption cannot be a sustainable approach to economics, let alone to human flourishing as a whole.

A brief elaboration of the graphic representations of Triple Bottom Line (see Fig. 3.1, right) is sufficient to evoke the core of this critique. In the classical Venn-diagram version, the economy is certainly qualified against the social and the environment as externalities, but graphically most of the economy remains unconcerned with sustainability. Just as in reality, it remains business as usual. Sustainability is reduced to the small central intersection of the three domains.

Problem Two: The Triple Bottom Line Approach Re-centres the Economy

Later an alternative to the Venn diagram was presented as a means of resolving the reductive presentation of sustainability-in-intersection (Fig. 3.1, left). It showed three concentric circles with ‘society’ sitting inside ‘environment’, and the economy sitting inside ‘society’. Environmentalists rallied to this version. It had the virtue of locating the economic within the environment, but they forgot about two

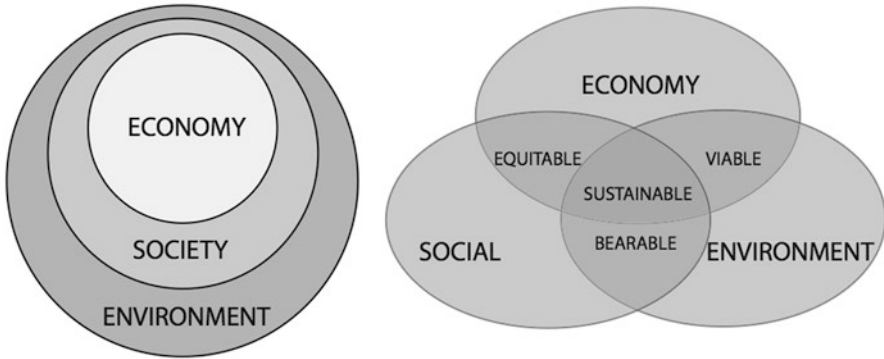


Fig. 3.1 Variations of the triple bottom line approach: the embedded circles and venn diagram versions

fundamental issues: firstly, by replacing the social with society the figure came to be organised through a methodological nationalism where society equals the nation-state; secondly, the economy was returned to the centre of all considerations about everything.

There have been valiant attempts to recuperate the Triple Bottom Line approach (Gross, 2015), but what remains at the core of all these variations is that they begin with the wrong focus—the economy—and then spend all their effort qualifying that focus while in practice the economic or more precisely corporate economics remain at the centre. The Triple Bottom Line begins with corporations. It is a corporate-oriented approach. Recent airport blockbuster books such as *Six Capitals* (Gleeson-White, 2014) just repeat these problems and amplify them by turning everything into capital: finance capital, manufactured capital, intellectual capital, human capital, social and relationship capital, and natural capital. This is the schema towards which the posthumanists should be directing their critical energy—the ‘natural capital’ nexus—not a residual humanism.

In summary, the weak version of Triple Bottom Line approach gives ‘the economic’ an independent status that is ideologically assumed rather than analytically argued. The strong version elevates the economic to the master category. At the same time, the social—that is, the way in which humans live and relate to each other and the environment—is treated as secondary. Concurrently, the environment comes to be treated as an externality or background feature. It becomes the externality that humans can use as resource, and the human dimension of ecological relations comes to be defined only in terms of statistical costs and benefits. This singular-triple view of the world, for all that it might appear flawed when the obvious is pointed out, has almost comprehensive legitimacy. It is startling how often one reads the taken-for-granted triplet of ‘economic, environmental, and social’ sustainability in texts that are otherwise quite reflexive about their assumptions.

Circles of Social Life

Two challenges have been set up across the course of this essay. First, how do we get beyond the Great Divide between the social (the human and others) and the natural (what some call ‘the nonhuman’), without collapsing the natural and the social into a singular amorphous tangle where the terms ‘social’ and ‘natural’ cease to have distinguishable meaning? Second, how do we displace the economic at the centre of all sustainability thinking, but without that decentring leaving economics as having a re-established or continuing autonomous primacy?

The suggestion here for handling these challenges is that we begin with the relation between the social and the natural—one of the major points of contention that the posthumanists pose—and instead of collapsing them into each other, recognise that we still need the concept of ‘the natural’ to name both all that is beyond the human, and what grounds the human. In the *Circles of Social Life* approach, social life is inextricably embedded in the natural, but the natural does not depend upon the social (James, Magee, Scerri, & Steger, 2015). What this means is that nature is basic to everything social, but not the other way round. While social practice and meaning can reconstitute elements of the natural, and social life has been increasing colonising ‘our’ natural world, there are natural worlds—micro and mega—that are currently beyond human social extension that we will possibly never affect and probably never have more than glimmers of understanding. Thus the Anthropocene still has its current limits—planet Earth.

The second step is to focus its point of critique on intensifying capitalism and the abstraction of social relations (rather than humanism). Capitalism is a form of economics that centres itself as basic to social life. Whereas the Triple Bottom Line approach practically prioritises economics—while rhetorically appearing to qualify it—the Circles approach puts economics in its place as one of the *social* domains grounded in the natural. That is, whereas ‘business as usual’ is predicated on treating nature as a residual zone to be saved, the Circles approach acknowledges that all social relations, including economics, are always already built upon a fragile but irreducible natural world. Whereas the usual approach treats the environment as a series of metrics, such as in carbon accounting, this alternative recognises that as humans we are part of nature. Human activity is treated as located both within nature and more explicitly as conducted through an ecological domain, concerned with basic questions of needs and limits, which in turn now finds itself ‘scientifically’ fading off at its edges into nature beyond the human. To be sure, over the last half century, human impact on the planet has been expanding into basic environmental systems that were once much bigger than us, but this does not involve ‘the end of nature’.

Whereas the Triple Bottom Line approach, even in its latest variations of Integrated Reporting and One Reporting, treats financial accounting as *the* core discipline of economics, the Circles of Social Life approach treats each social domain as part of an integrated social whole. Each domain can be analytically lifted out for the purpose of assessing questions of sustainability and so on, but this is only

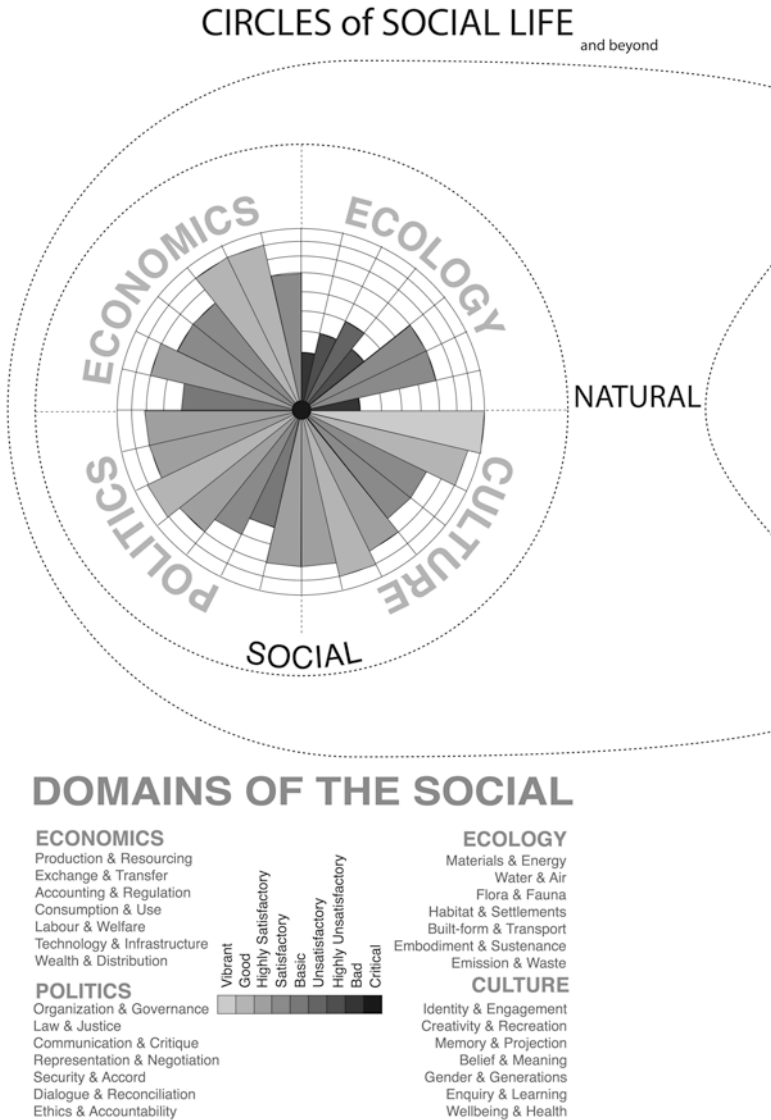


Fig. 3.2 Circles of social life: decentring the human while grounding the social

an analytic move (James et al., 2015; Magee et al., 2013). There is not the space here to elaborate on this alternative, but a picture can sometimes stand in for lots of words (see Fig. 3.2).

Thus the human has been decentred, while the social is given complex and variable meaning. The natural is treated as both grounding and extending infinitely beyond the social. And through the domain of the ecological—defined as a social

domain that emphasises the practices, discourses, and materialities that occur across the intersection between the social and the natural realms—the environment of things, processes, and assemblages comes right into the centre-point of what it means to be human. In this way, the centre-point of the circle, which in Euclidian terms has no size, large or small, becomes not a plughole but the point of intersection of all social things—even as *for analytical purposes* they can be separated out.

Conclusion

At the end of his elegant essay *The Ecology of Others* Philippe Descola (2013) concludes with the following statement that accords with what I have been trying to do. With the recognition of the Anthropocene and in the context of climate change, the erosion of biodiversity and the development of biotechnologies that blur the distinction between the human and the natural:

[I]t has become indispensable in the West [and also elsewhere] to reflect upon the effects of the disintegration of our notion of the natural world by locating this problem in a more general framework; this framework would allow the examination of the different conceptions of the biological dimension of humans and of relations with the physical environment that have developed in various places in the course of history ... This involves first choices about the siting of ontological boundaries ... Second, it involves the systems of value which orient the practical relations with the Others, human and nonhuman ... Finally it involves the devices of classification (Descola, 2013, pp. 86–87).

Whereas the posthumanist approach homogenises ontologies and the Triple Bottom Line approach flattens domains, the Circles approach, for all its weaknesses, begins the process of recognising both ontological difference and the interconnectedness of social-natural life. When it comes to basic ontological issues we seem to spiral from one exaggerated stance to another. Themes that seem to generate passionate spiralling are the idealism/materialism, economic imperative/ecological sustainability and humanism/posthumanism debates. The Circles method (as part of a larger engaged theory of constitutive abstraction) is intended to respond to the terms that underlie these kinds of debates and provide a simple but rigorous way of thinking and acting beyond the mainstream paradigm.⁵ At least, as it circles the question of the human condition, this approach recognises the very different ways in which people on this planet relate to Others—human and nonhuman.

⁵The version presented here is fairly flat, emphasising one main level of analysis (doing). For a much fuller account that begins to layer the approach in terms of four epistemological levels—doing, acting, relating and being—see James et al. (2015). For an example of how this method has been used in pedagogy see the curriculum development of the Ross Institute, New York, <http://www.circlesofsustainability.org/projects/developing-a-sustainability-curriculum/>.

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