

## APPLICATION OF THE ETHICS OF ALTERITY TO THE ENVIRONMENT

### *APLICAÇÃO DA ÉTICA DA ALTERIDADE AO MEIO AMBIENTE*

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#### **Abstract**

The realization of sustainable development opens space for ethical, economic, social, and environmental discussions. Significant environmental degeneration and serious problems of social exclusion require the re-configuration of the relation between State, market, and nature. Based on Lévinas' studies on ethics, this research addresses the recognition of the human Other and the nature Other as a premise for constructing a natural contract that deems the human Ego as part of the environment, rather than just its dominator. This study aims to show that it is possible to respond to the need to reconfigure the relationship between the State, society, nature, and the market. Conduct for sustainable development are yet to recognize and consider the biota in its entirety and importance. The critical deductive method and bibliographic research

#### **Resumo**

*A efetivação do desenvolvimento sustentável abre espaço para discussões éticas, econômicas, sociais e ambientais. Diante da significativa degeneração ambiental e dos graves problemas de exclusão social, faz-se necessário reconfigurar a relação entre o ser humano e a natureza. A partir dos estudos de Lévinas sobre a ética, a pesquisa aborda o reconhecimento do outro humano e do outro natureza como premissa para a construção de um contrato natural em que o Eu homem se reconheça como parte do meio ambiente, e não apenas seu dominador. O estudo busca demonstrar que é possível responder à necessidade de reconfiguração da relação entre indivíduo e meio ambiente. As condutas em prol do desenvolvimento sustentável não têm atendido ao reconhecimento e à consideração da biota em sua integralidade e importância. Utilizaram-se o método dedutivo crítico*



were used. It was concluded that it will be possible to meet the premises of sustainability and recognize the environment as a relevant Other from the perspective of alterity.

**Keywords:** alterity; ethics; environment; sustainable development.

*e a pesquisa bibliográfica. Concluiu-se que será possível atender às premissas da sustentabilidade, com o reconhecimento do meio ambiente como um Outro relevante sob a ótica da alteridade.*

**Palavras-chave:** alteridade; ética; meio ambiente; desenvolvimento sustentável.

## Introduction

The economic and social development model is based on the management of natural resources and the use of biomes, which drive progress and can unbalance the environment. Human conduct, which sometimes disregards the importance of the environment for its own benefit, harms human beings themselves. Thus, it is clear that the interactions of human beings with the environment have always lacked a deep ethical dialogue.

Economic, social, and labor transformations greatly derive from the globalization process, directly impacting the environmental balance and the survival of the planet. The processes of development affect the less well-off populations, the lower classes, and those at the bottom of the productive processes the most. The capitalist system is related to the production and distribution of private goods and services in the preponderance of capital, aiming at profit and remuneration of work by wages without any commitment to social inclusion, collective progress, and environmental preservation.

Research must establish new reflections on the theme, i.e., inverting the discourse to recognize nature for who it is in its entirety, rather than based on what it has to offer individuals. It is a matter of doing good to the one who does not know for the simple fact that they are. It is based on the importance of the other, of the unknown, because everyone must be considered for who they are, even when that other is nature itself.

This new perspective is based on the need to rediscuss the ways to promote sustainable development in which economic and social progress goes hand in hand with the maintenance and preservation of the environment. Faced with the need to reconsider the process of sustainable development, it questions what ethical foundation could guide new and preeminent human conducts. It is necessary to think of a natural contract to be signed between human beings and nature, in which the former becomes part of the latter, rather than its dominator and parasite.

Discussions about new ways of seeing nature are pertinent given the need to safeguard it and reverse systems deeply marked by exclusion. It is necessary to encourage behaviors that recognize and consider the human Other and the nature Other in their completeness. Using the critical deductive method and bibliographic research, this study aims to show that Emmanuel Lévinas' ethics of alterity can effectively guide the construction of a new form of relationship between human beings and the environment.

## 1 Building an ethics for environmental alterity

The notion of human ethics regarding the impact on nature has been discussed over the centuries due to the preeminent need for compatibility. Although human beings and nature have for a long time been seen as irreconcilable, given the need for social and economic growth, modern findings on the limitation of natural resources have driven discussions about this inevitable reconciliation, i.e., the field of sustainable development.

The postmodern ecological crisis is related to current human, economic, and political values as they have directly affected the balance of nature, which must be recognized in itself and as a whole of which the human being is a part. Capra (2002, p. 268) points out that changing the values of the global economy is the great challenge of this 21st century since it requires to “make it compatible with the demands of human dignity and ecological sustainability”.

This entails the urgent need to promote “a radical revision of these assumptions on which Western society is grounded as they are based on a way of seeing the Universe that is centered on the human being” (Soeiro; Pinheiro; Bautista, 2017, p. 254; free translation). The idea that human beings are the only living being with needs to be met has never been compatible with the maintenance of the planet itself. It just so happens that, for centuries, the reflexes of this thought failed to directly and clearly affect human beings themselves. Anthropocentric values are no longer in line with the needs of the universe, which depends on a basic balance for its own maintenance.

The centuries-long exploitation of the environment raises global questions about the possibility of developing economic models that resume the relationship between humans and nature and promote technical and market progress. This requires valuing the individual and the nature Others in their completeness. The ethical balance between human beings and nature must be re-established by consolidating the concept of cooperation.

Faced with this scenario, Serres (1990) proposes the development of a “natural contract” in which human beings begin to understand themselves as a part of the environment, rather than their owners. Such a contract foresees a symbiosis, i.e., reciprocal actions between human beings and nature to enable individuals to enjoy natural resources without deteriorating the environment as the continuous and prolonged damage to the biota implies the concrete and future degeneration of human beings. It is a matter of ensuring that human beings avoid constituting a parasite of nature as, in this circumstance, they only remove rather than contribute, dominate rather than congregate (Serres, 1990). Removing parasitism will obtain “reciprocity: however much nature gives man, man must give that much back to nature, now a legal subject” (Serres, 1990, p. 66).

The natural contract Serres (1990) proposed breaks with anthropocentrism and replaces it by biocentrism since the former “views humans as above or outside of nature, as the source of all values, and ascribes only instrumental, or ‘use’, value to nature” (Capra, 2006, p. 25).

The humanistic values of postmodern societies have proved insufficient in the face of the current environmental crisis. The distancing of the global condition from nature and its transformation into an object of human beings removed nature from ethical relations (Soeiro; Pinheiro; Bautista, 2017).

In line with a new “natural contract”, Cirelli and Costa (2018) also advocate a new ethics, the ethics of the future, which is based on responsibility and an ecological paradigm. It replaces anthropocentric positions by a biocentric conception to give voice to the rights of non-human living beings (animals, plants, and other living beings).

The ethical issues related to environmental valuation deserve constant attention and debate as they are a common diffuse good. A new ethical vision of the human being toward the environment considers the concepts of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and biocentrism (Sirvinskas, 2019). They have as reference the centrality of the system, as anthropocentrism places human beings as the “center of the universe”. On the other hand, ecocentrism places the environment at the center. Finally, in biocentrism, human beings and the environment share the center of the universe in an intermediate position (Sirvinskas, 2019).

The instrumental and utilitarian character given to the environment is no longer reasonable due to finite natural resources and a clear interdependence of human beings in relation to the universe. It is necessary to rethink this nexus from the perspective of a new ethics that can reconstruct this connection. For this, a radical conversion in postmodern thoughts and values is essential to introduce

alterity as the axis of the relationship between human beings and nature, valuing both. This is a condition inherent to biocentrism and aimed at sustainable development.

Accepting and affirming the responsibility of the human Ego in the face of others and the non-human Other should base the elaboration of theories and actions related to sustainable development because only by understanding human beings as part of the biota will it be possible to create mechanisms for the social and economic development of postmodernity without drastic damages to the environment.

Current welfare must not be a fundamental reason to compromise the well-being of those who will come. It is necessary to respect and consider the nature Other and the human Others that do not make up the current generation in its entirety to develop a systemic relationship between individuals, the biota, and future generations. Therefore, “the Ethics of Alterity, which is the vision, inclusion, and respect for the Other, is at this moment the cornerstone of the construction of a new future” (Azevedo *et al.*, 2018; free translation).

The current models of production and life have proven ineffective in the process of seeking environmental solutions as they have transformed nature into raw materials to fulfill human satisfaction. As a result, “it brought with it a false impression of economic and technological progress” without accounting for the “negative externalities” of the production chain, promoting “the ontological rupture between man and nature, of which he is a part”, according to Gonçalves’ perception (2014, p. 27; free translation).

The rupture of human beings and nature has dehumanized this relationship, rendering the former as only the consumer and predator of the latter. The consciousness of belonging was removed from the moment in which human beings began to understand nature as their own good for their private use. However, the environmental response to human mistreatment is not instantaneous, thus necessarily harming future generations (Gonçalves, 2014). To think about the society that is to come is, above all, to make intergenerational solidarity concrete and to apply alterity considering a relationship that one neither sees nor yet even know.

Alterity in the face of the nature Other means rethinking the human attitude toward the indiscriminate use of the environment and a concern for what is to come to the extent that environmental protection currently guarantees access to natural resources by those who will make up the coming society. The current development paradigm implies a parasitism toward the biota, rather than

a symbiotic contract, as per Serres (1990). Such behavior have caused serious environmental problems, such as global warming, loss of biodiversity, and social disparities, losses that imply a complete disregard for future collectivities.

This environmental crisis humanity faces stems from the lethargic action of pertinent measures. Although human behavior increasingly contributes to environmental degradation, ways to mitigate the caused impacts follow an inverse speed. Reis and Bizawu (2015, p. 31) claim this environmental crisis is “due to the slow effectiveness of radical measures to combat global warming as climate change has become a major threat to survival” (free translation).

This difficult environmental issue would derive from the human posture, from the human Ego that refused to recognize the nature Other. The option for an ethical act of indifference without alterity caused an abyss to be formed in this relationship. The passage of time fixated indignation, misery, and penury in the disregard of the Other and their protection, the figure of Lévinas’ faceless Other, who should be selflessly protected. The consequences of an alienating and irresponsible system have been transferred to the environment.

Socio-environmental changes require the expansion of State and society actions toward environmental preservation for future generations in the interest of transgenerations. They depend on the formulation of public policies for sustainable development because “society demands from the public authorities efficient actions and measures for nature conservation and environmental protection, transforming the environmental theme into an essential subject of public policy and a perennial political and social theme”, as Coimbra and Santin (2018, p. 84; free translation) argue when addressing environmental licensing in an environmental protected area.

This concern with the construction and execution of public policies can be a form of alterity since it reconstructs the understanding of the systemic union of biotic and abiotic beings.

It is necessary to think about a sustainable development that is based on human beings’ social, economic, and environmental responsibility toward the planet and future generations. This requires for this relationship to be rebuilt based on an ethic that promotes respect and recognition of one in the face of the other. More than ceasing to degrade, human beings must once again recognize nature and consider the currently still unattainable and even unknown Future Other.

Brazilian constituents showed great concern with the environmental issue. In view of the defense and protection of the environment for “present and

future generations”, a human intergenerational issue, the Brazilian Constitution established, in its art. 225, the diffuse right of all who “have the right to an ecologically balanced environment”, (Brasil, 1988) a common good with an apparent anthropocentric conception. However, the ecological balance of an “ecologically balanced environment” transcends human interests due to the dimension of sustainable development and its undeniable biocentric inspiration due to the need for harmony between rational use and viable protection in a form integrating anthropocentric and ecocentric interests in protecting human and other living and inanimate beings.

## 2 Ethical premise for sustainable development

The environmentalist movement is old, a response to the industrialization process, which was strengthened by the Second World War due to the fears of nuclear radiation pollution, being further accentuated in 1969 with the first photo of the Earth seen from space (the “great blue sea”). Thus becoming a global issue, with the United Nations (UN) leading numerous multilateral meetings with affiliated countries.

In 1972, the UN promoted the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (Sweden), issuing the Environmental Manifesto with 19 principles, among which the environmental proposition “to defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations has become an imperative goal for mankind” (ONU, 2020; free translation). In the same year, the UN General Assembly created the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to coordinate work on the global environment.

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) published a groundbreaking report entitled *Our Common Future*, which introduced the concept of sustainable development into public discourse. In 1992, Rio de Janeiro held the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the “Earth Summit”, adopting “Agenda 21”, which proposed to protect Planet Earth and its sustainable development, detailing the world’s move away from the current unsustainable model of economic growth to direct activities of protection and renewal of environmental resources necessary for growth and development (ONU, 2020).

In 2002, Rio+10 took place in Johannesburg (South Africa); in 2012, again in Rio de Janeiro, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, took place. In 2015, in New York, at the UN headquarters, the Sustainable

Development Summit took place, with the definition of new Sustainable Development Goals, contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN).

From the 1970s onward, the synthesis of UN international meetings and documents shows an environmental interest in the costs the planet incurred due to the aggressive use of natural resources and the emergence of the concept of sustainable development. These conventions went beyond environmental themes to address issues including poverty and the external debt of developing countries, unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, demographic pressures, and the structure of the international economy. That action program also recommended ways to strengthen the role played by large groups—women, trade unions, farmers, children and youth, Indigenous peoples, the scientific community, local authorities, businesses, industries, and NGOs—in achieving sustainable development (ONU, 2020).

The concept of sustainable development exceeds ecological bias to affirm the need for maintaining an appropriate balance between economic and social development even under the exploitation of natural resources. In short, it seeks consideration to guarantee two fundamental rights: (1) free enterprise and (2) a healthy environment. This balanced model seeks to meet the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future ones to meet their own needs.

However, it is possible to identify that concepts of sustainable development still preserve human beings at the center of the discussion since the purpose of social and economic progress, using what the biota can offer, is foreseen to meet the needs of human beings and those who will come, rather than for the environment itself. This notion of ethics remains idealized in human beings.

Dealing with the care of nature requires finding solutions to issues such as pollution due to human activities, climate imbalance, scarcity of drinking water, and other current problems. Polluting waste can affect all kinds of life and, although poorest populations suffer the first impacts, it will ultimately affect everyone. The habit of disposal, added to the large-scale emission of harmful gases and the waste of non-renewable resources must be reviewed to enable the possibility of thinking about a dignified future for humanity (Reis; Bizawu, 2015).

The path toward effective sustainability entails a radical transformation of the human posture. Pope Francis defends environmental restructuring and the resumption of care for nature in the complete change of social lifestyles, consumption models, and power organizations. He points out that “authentic



human development has a moral character. It presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and ‘take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system’” (Francisco, 2015, p. 6).

Sustainable development based on ethics must enunciate the approximation of individuals to nature so they cease to be just consumers, mere exploiters of natural resources, and become admirers and a part of it. Only the assimilation that everything constituting the universe is directly united will produce true alterity and transformation in the current forms of use and domination (Francisco, 2015).

Pope Francis, in encyclical *Laudato Si*, which has a strong environmental connotation, defends the change of the human view toward the environment, labeling it a “common home”. It refers to everyone. As a good for all, it requires a new environmental ethic that involves responsibility and sustainable development based on educational actions, lifestyle changes, and measures of resistance to the advance of the technocratic paradigm, including spirituality.

The responsibility of protecting the environment belongs to all subjects due to its indivisibility and unavailability and the collective dimension of its advantages and burdens derived from misuse (Gonçalves, 2014). Thus, if the State, society, and the market are actors who have ignored the coexistence of the nature Other throughout history, they must rethink their forms of interconnection.

Sustainable development implies new forms of growth that guarantee human and environmental dignity (Francisco, 2015). Ensuring sustainable development from an environmental point of view refers to acting in preserving life by the balance in nature itself. This stability must derive from the joint experience between living and non-living beings to form a self-sufficient system. This complex arrangement implies taking from the environment only that which enables it to regenerate itself and that which it can give back to human beings (Brown, 2010).

Economic and social progress must consider technological transformations since they can help to reconcile financial gain with the preservation of nature. Moreover, food production, consumption, infrastructure construction, and the distribution of the resources necessary for life must consider effective human demands. Economic and social development must entail promoting a globally dignified life, rather human care (Francisco, 2015).

Reis and Bizawu (2015) highlight the papal concern in the encyclical *Laudato Si*, stressing the need for environmental defense actions by developed states. In the face of the threat posed by global warming, especially climate change, this struggle is “a moral imperative to save humanity from the greed and indifference

of the rich” (free translation). The authors also note the need for dialogical reflection on universal responsibility and planetary solidarity for environmental damage originating from economic profit and the ineffectiveness of international environmental conventions (Reis; Bizawu, 2015).

Attention to sustainable development in the economic field also affects trade policies. This remodeling must involve international organizations and States since only a collective attitude can generate an effective transformation in favor of the maintenance of the planet. Although insufficient, debating issues is necessary to create trade agendas that link profitable transactions to the conservation of the resources indispensable to development (Bizawu; Toledo; Lopes, 2017).

Without saying so explicitly, Pope Francis defends values that are inherent and close to Levinasian alterity, the Other, by recommending a change in behavior in relation to human beings and nature. It is inevitable to rethink an ethical foundation to restructure the relationship between the State, society, market, and nature. The currently configured capitalist system has failed to maintain the necessary balance of physical, chemical, and biological influences and interactions. To mark this reconfiguration, this research culminated in Lévinas’ theory of alterity due to its imperative toward a model in which individuals have the human and non-human Others as its legitimate premises.

### **3 Ethics of alterity in the reconstruction of the socio-environmental relationship**

Discussions on sustainable development highlight the inevitability that behaviors toward it be based on an theoretical ethical substrate of alterity. Since the recognition of nature has been based on its benefits to human beings (generating indiscriminate use), it is essential that this concept be converted to orient its examination and its importance by those who constitute it. The consideration of the nature Other from the perspective of alterity can be configured as a theoretical axis to promote conducts for effective sustainable development.

Lévinas’ theory of alterity (Totality and Infinity) displaces the traditional Heideggerian ontology centered on the Ego (Being and Time) to the Other, placing Ethics as an antecedent, a presupposition of Philosophy itself, creating the figure of the faceless Face, and moving away from that approach in a transcendental for a disinterested protection of the Other. Despite the superiority of the Ego and even the possibility of annihilating the weaker Other in a form of responsibility, kindness, and love, it fails to do so. The relation between the Ego and the Other

brings a complicating factor in the face of the emergence of a Third, the He. Lévinas exemplifies the Ego by the figure of man; the Other, by that of a woman, and the He, the Third, by that of the son. In the He-Other relationship, the Other would receive all possible (infinite) benefits, but the appearance of a Third, the He, requires harmonizing a once bilateral relationship into a triangular or trilateral one, entailing the creation of a norm, a law, an object of the policy to regulate the situation, with Justice defining rights.

Lévinas' thought was developed in the detection of the contemporary crisis in its anti-human domination procedures, its eagerness to consume to "exist", its individualism, self-isolation, and attempt to identify with the masses that formed a group of those excluded in the social game of consumerism, considered "refuse", "different", the "other", to be "confined" (Gomes, 2008).

In this context, Lévinas praises the presence of the "other", "the face", in a process of recognition because it is before it that "I stand and recognize first rather than myself and thanks to it I recognize myself" (Gomes, 2008, p. 37; free translation). This critique of ontology is related to its influence on violence and intolerance toward the "different" and domination over the "other". Gomes (2008, p. 37) understands that Levinasian ethics is translated into the "infinite responsibility of the Ego for the other, it is the first philosophy" (free translation). The emergence of the third is a complicating factor in the relationship because, for Lévinas, "between the Ego and the other, a relationship of sociality is established" due to responsibility for "ethical alterity", in the "simple epiphany of the Face", in which justice is necessary as it "seems a multiplier of responsibility among men in society" (Gomes, 2008, p. 49; free translation). These human relationships and their plural experience determine regulatory measures, "the elaboration of laws and the establishment of institutional justice so that the responsibility of the Ego toward the other extends to all others" (Gomes, 2008, p. 49; free translation).

Haddock-Lobo (2010, p. 90) points out that human multiplicity prevents us from forgetting the third party, which cannot truly be ignored as that would be "the greatest irresponsibility". This would be, for Lévinas, the "hour of justice". Haddock Lobo stresses that love, goodness, is transformed into the wisdom of love, the justice of the men of the State:

[...] when the love of the neighbor and their closeness appeal to reason, which becomes goodness, and when philosophy becomes the wisdom of love. At this moment, some "prophetic voice" reminds the men of the State of the faceless faces that hide behind the identities of citizens. Justice, then, makes this voice in the future (Haddock-Lobo, 2010, p. 90; free translation).

Lévinas' texts are "fundamentally an aspiration to an ideal, to a humanism"<sup>1</sup> in the reflexive experimentation of inner transformation, according to Riondet (2009).

Alterity can be found in the expansion of Emmanuel Lévinas' studies as the philosopher approaches the responsibility of the human Ego toward the human Other from the perspective of the ethical Infinite. The notion of responsibility develops by the need to leave the individual Ego and go toward the Other to reach the Infinite (Lévinas, 2005). This research aims to develop it under the bias of the human Ego toward the non-human Other, in this case, Nature.

The ethics Lévinas proposed pushes parties to the intersubjectivity of the Other as it proposes the recognition of the Other and its consideration without expecting anything in return. Responsibility would simply derive from the existence of the Other, rather than from what the Other may eventually offer to the Ego (Lévinas, 1993). According to Lévinas (2005, p. 149-150) ethics is,

[...] the human *qua* human. [...] The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself. I don't think that there is a human group that can take exception to that ideal, even if it is declared an ideal of holiness. I am not saying that the human being is a saint, I'm saying that he or she is the one who has understood that holiness is indisputable. This is the beginning of philosophy, this is the rational, the intelligible.

He proposes that the action of the Ego is unpretentious and alien to any retributivity. It would be a "being-for-beyond-my-death" (Lévinas, 1993, p. 45), i.e., a valid conduct, regardless of the existence of the Ego, that still cares about the passage of time, this time being the arrival until the time of the Other. A conduct "from the identical toward an Other that is absolutely other", showing an extreme generosity (Lévinas, 1993, p. 45).

The philosopher's thought is marked by his experience in war, a moment in which he observed both the extreme horror of human conduct toward the other and its total dependence on them. The objectification of human beings, added to their *status* of insignificance in the face of the conflict, showed the importance of considering how human beings are both relevant and ephemeral. To overcome this scenario, Lévinas proposes the accountability of one toward the other by the ethics of alterity (Aguiar, 2006).

The particular significance of the Other is evident in Lévinas' theory of alterity, which, rather than recognizing the Other from its own need, do so from the desire to understand it. The author reveals this understanding by showing

<sup>1</sup> From the original: "fondamentalement aspiration à un idéal, à un humanisme".

that “I find myself facing the Other. [...] He is, primordially, *sense* because he lends it on expression itself, because only through him can a phenomenon such as signification introduce itself, per of itself, into being” (Lévinas, 1993, p. 50).

Alterity means taking the place of the other to understand, accept, and value them. It has no concern about destroying it or subjecting the will of the Ego to that of the Other since it aims to differentiate it by who they are. Thus, by fractioning interpersonal relationships, alterity beings to gather individuals (Azevedo *et al.*, 2018).

Lévinas (2005, p. 27) deals with comprehension via language, the word, in interpersonal relationships, in awareness:

To understand a person is already to speak to him. To posit the existence of the other by letting him be is already to have accepted that existence, to have taken it into account. “To have accepted”, and “to have taken into account” do not come down to an understanding, a letting be. Speech delineates an original relation. The point is to see the function of language not as subordinate to the *consciousness* we have of the presence of the other, or of his proximity, or of our community with him, but as a condition of that conscious realization.

Paying attention to the Other requires removing the egoism of the Ego via alterity. This occurs through the consciousness questioned by the face of the Other, which “disorients the intentionality that sights it” (Lévinas, 1993, p. 53). In the realization of the face of the Other, the “Ego loses its sovereign coincidence with self.[...] In the face of the obligation of the Other, the Ego is banished from that repose” (Lévinas, 1993, p. 53).

For Lévinas, responsibility toward the Other arises from the encounter with the face of the Other since this confluence provokes a need for a response from the Ego. Since it is impossible to detach oneself from this provocation, the only one who can respond to it is the Ego, thus giving rising the responsibility, caused by the ethical movement of the Other in the face of the consciousness of the Other. Lévinas (1993) calls their union Infinite.

The construction of this ethical relationship begins when the face of the other emerges from the Ego since, at that moment, the latter can take a position in relation to the former. This position, which denies abdication, can even be one of renunciation or indifference since these behaviors are also forms of taking a position. The Ego can close itself off from the Other, deny and subjugate it, or even kill it. It so happens that the Ego, rather than doing it in consideration for the Other, does so because it understands the importance and relevance of the Other in relation to Itself.

The negative posture of the Ego in relation to the Other is possible but implausible in the face of the logic of alterity. This is because they are not forms of construction of the fundamental ethics idealized by Lévinas. It is essential that the Ego and the Other come face to face for the recognition and development of alterity. This is a call for goodness, justice, and generosity, from the concept of doing good to others without considering one's own good.

In short, "Lévinas' proposal points toward a relationship in networks given the impossibility of the ego being ethically constituted without the other" (Aguiar, 2006, p. 16; free translation). The Other and its presence is what reveals the ethics of the Ego. In an authentic way, Lévinas considers the importance and existence of the Other even before the constitution of the ethics of the Ego. Rather than on an individual perspective, it is based on the analysis that the Other, in its originality, composes the Ego itself (Aguiar, 2006).

According to Dameri (2013, p. 98; free translation),

From here one understands how much Lévinas' philosophy, which aims at a new way of thinking about our culture and our relationship with others, teaches us that our life cannot be separated from charity, from practical activity in support and in favor of our neighbor, as if to say that it is always the other who takes precedence over me<sup>2</sup>.

The scope of alterity Lévinas proposed gives rise to justice, which implies comparing the manifestation of the idea of equity, rather than individuals and attitudes. According to the author's studies, only this would be able to promote the wisdom of love for the other (Lévinas, 2005). The proposal of the "ethics of alterity is the ability to live with the different, individual, group, or nature through a look aimed precisely at the recognition and acceptance of differences" (Azevedo *et al.*, 2018, p. 43; free translation).

Although Levinasian ethics is not properly characterized as an environmental ethics, it is in line with this discussion as it shows the essential character of relations with the environment: the responsibility of the human Ego toward the nature Other and the future and unknown human Other (the latter of which could be called the transgenerational Other). Lévinas (1993) proposes the distancing from the individualist and utilitarian view of the Other, thus adapting to the need for human action in extreme generosity toward the environment and future generations.

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2 From the original: "Da qui si capisce quanto la filosofia di Levinas oltre, che rivolta ad un nuovo modo di pensare la nostra cultura e il rapporto com gli altri, ci insegna che la nostra vita non può essere disgiunta dalla carità, dall'attività pratica a sostegno e a favore del prossimo, come dire che è sempre l'altro che ha precedenza su di me".

The Levinasian ethical point of view understands that the nature Other arises from the human need to use natural resources and who that Other is. Thus, the nature Other means, by itself, the need to recognize in its completeness. Rather than a question of distancing human use from what the biota can confer, it attributes it responsibility for this conduct and preserves the intergenerational relationship to guarantee the dignified existence of the one who is to come.

Only by revising the human conception of the environment, to understand it as the whole of which the individual is a part, is it possible to construct environmental ethics. It is implausible to continue observing the universe in the centrality of the present subject because nature is one and indivisible (Francisco, 2015), goods of diffuse interest.

In this search, such theory has room for application considering that “Lévinas’ proposal, although centered on the human being, contemplates aspects that are most relevant to the environmental issue, such as alterity and responsibility for the future, ethical thinking focused on the Other” (Souza; Dutra, 2011, p. 18; free translation).

Giongo (2010) defends the ethical reflection of the current moment to frame the right to the environment and quality of life as a human right. Especially considering the relevance of an ecologically balanced environment, the author’s ethics of alterity seeks to build an ethical-ecological future that preserves human rights.

The incorporation of the environment into the list of human rights is already included in Brazilian regulations after the issuing of the National Human Rights Program (PNDH-3), object of Decree no. 7,037 (Brasil, 2009). In its annex, in justifying the Guiding Axis II (Development and Human Rights), the innovation of the incorporation of the environment into human rights was observed:

PNDH-3 innovates by incorporating a healthy environment and sustainable cities as Human Rights, proposes the inclusion of the item ‘environmental rights’ in the monitoring reports on Human Rights and the item ‘Human Rights’ in the environmental reports, as well as fosters research into socially inclusive technologies (Brasil, 2009; free translation).

The aforementioned Guiding Axis II addresses the implementation of a sustainable, participatory, and non-discriminatory development model with social and economic inclusion, environmental balance, technological responsibility, and cultural and regional diversity. Its Guideline 4 includes strategic objectives to strengthen family farming and agroecological models and foster research and implementation of policies to development socially and environmentally

sustainable, inclusive, and emancipatory technologies. Its Guideline 6 aims to promote and protect environmental rights as human rights, including future generations as subjects of rights, with the affirmation of environmental rights as human rights as a strategic objective (Brasil, 2009). The Regulation provides for several relevant programmatic actions for each objective.

Calgaro and Sobrinho (2020) propose the role of sustainability as a means of minimizing the socio-environmental problems caused by the market and capitalism in consumer-centric societies. Realizing a new rationality for the human species under a preservationist ethic aiming at the preservation of the common home grounds the understanding of sustainable development.

To create a dependency between the human Ego and the non-human Other means to produce responsibility for the Voice and Face of that Other. Resignifying this relationship depends on applying otherness, which proposes transferring the ethical sense of the Ego to the non-human Other, recognizing its wholeness and dignity. Non-selfish actions, which are based on the indeclinable responsibility of the human being toward nature, can remove the barrier created by human-human relationships. Beckert (2008, p. 124; free translation) takes a position on the matter:

[...] I am not only responsible for the other, but also for the otherness of the other, that is, for the discernment between the ambiguity with which the latter appears to me, ready to dissolve in the anonymity of the being from which it sprang, and the indelible trace it leaves in its wake, almost imperceptible in the heart of the order that characterizes the ontological totality, but which it is up to us to detect and retain.

Since the nature Other is an integral being in of itself, it is necessary to recognize it as a subject to guarantee its protection. It is only by recognizing the Other as a subject that the Ego becomes capable of conferring on universality the capacity to be so. The possibility of everyone becoming a subject broadens protection and imputes responsibility to everyone.

From an environmental point of view, it is important that human beings understand themselves as finite responsible beings belonging to an immeasurable Other. An attitude based on alterity is urgent in postmodern society to break the cycle of utilitarianism and levity toward the maintenance of life. Souza and Dutra (2011, p. 19) refer to social insensitivity as “the frequent climatic tragedies, the results of which contribute to the irresponsibility collectively organized around centralized power, account for society’s insensitivity to Others” (free translation).

The development of an environmental ethics must start by admitting the



nature and human Others as living beings. All, as creatures endowed with life, require the right conditions for their survival. Thus, the problem of environmental investigation refers to the maintenance of the environment and the economic and social development of current and future communities. Given that the environment consists of all beings that relate to each other (including human), it is necessary to implement an ethics that can maintain the balance of these interconnections.

Environmental protection must come not only from the pure applicability of the Law but also from ethical norms since individuals' actions must socially manifest their compatibility with the collective, including the environment (Bizawu; Mota, 2019). The authors recommend the need for a human-nature relational change, in which "the relationship between human beings and nature requires a true paradigmatic change since it is known that, with the end of the anthropocentric view, the environment cries out for effective protection and preservation" (Bizawu; Mota, 2019, p. 161; free translation).

Thus, postmodern environmental ethics is based on alterity, on doing for the Other, human beings or nature, without expecting retribution. It is a set of solidarity actions based on the recognition, integration, multiplicity, and complexity of all beings. In short, it requires a guideline for actions that consider the social progress of all, the economic advancement of each community, and the maintenance of environmental preservation within the scope of sustainable development and transgenerational concern to preserve current and future generations.

## Conclusion

Economic development, as conceived in recent centuries, conferred to a small portion of society the role of determining what human behaviors were necessary for the progress of communities, while also establishing preservation and protection priorities. Such actions, uninterested in the integration of legal and ideological structures, kept the preservation of community interests and the conservation of the environment out of their agenda. The posture of distancing of this economic systematization disregarded the human and the non-human Others in their singularities and importance.

The need to rediscuss the relationship between the individual and nature is necessary since progress begot immeasurable environmental damage. Because of the importance of each actor in interrelationships and in view of the maintenance

of the universe itself, it is essential to create a new way for the human Ego to see the nature Other. The processes of social exclusion and environmental degradation are notorious and, despite discussions on the promotion of sustainable development, it is necessary to change the centrality of the debate. Leaving aside an anthropocentric perspective, this research proposed the introduction of biocentrism as a starting point to promote a new connection between biotic and abiotic beings.

The biocentric thesis avoids excluding human relevance. In fact, it advocates the recognition of individuals as part of their own environment, rather than its dominant. For this, it was suggested the application of Lévinas' ethics of alterity so the human Ego could identify the face of the human and non-human Others to act toward them regardless of their own desires and needs.

The promotion of sustainable development can no longer be built solely on economic, social, and environmental pillars. Its lack of an ethical premise provide the inefficiency of this tripod. Thus, this study showed that the ethics of alterity is a plausible answer to the basis of new behaviors that aim at environmental protection and the development of societies.

Levinasian ethics, although not properly based on an environmental ethic, was adapted to the discussion because it aims at fostering solidarity, justice, and generosity in a concept of doing good to others without considering one's own good. It could thus support debates on sustainable development as the latter must be understood in the light of the interdependence between economic and social development and environmental preservation.

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Lara Caxico Martins was responsible for the conception of the ideas, the formulation and evolution of the research objectives, the elaboration of the text, the formulation and exposition of the ideas, and the final written version of the article. Valter Foletto Santin was responsible for the discussions of the research results, the supervision and direction of the work, the validation of the results, the visualization of the data, the final revision, and the editing of this article.

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