7. Conclusion

7.1 Living within Limits
If we strive to live a life without harming others, we have to be aware that there are limits to what we can do. ‘[… ] liberty cannot be absolute; it must be consistent with the interests of others.’\textsuperscript{802} These others include future generations, people in developing nations and non-human animals. There is a window of opportunities, a framework for acting, which should not be trespassed if we want to live the good life. There are two kinds of limits: natural and moral limits. Environmental science has now made abundantly clear that there are environmental biophysical boundaries and what they are.\textsuperscript{803} We are living on a finite planet with a finite carrying capacity and finite natural resources. Only our greed, institutionalized as consumerism and powered by the economic system of growth, is infinite. The basic idea of our western life style is suicidal, driving us towards the abyss of collapse. Our culture is a culture of extinction, we are killing of the life on the planet we live in and have caused ecocide.\textsuperscript{804} Our civilizations are based on harming others. We have to rethink our life style, our basic ideals, not only to stop harming others, but in order to survive. There is hardly any time left, we might already have transgressed the tipping point, a point of no return – but we can and should make the world a better place, a world with less suffering. Universal subjectivism can be a guideline in order to live a ‘no harm lifestyle’ and to build a no harm (global) society, which is aware of the worst-off positions of any kind of victims. The outcome of the (1) procedural (2) hypothetical (3) pathocentric (4) individualistic (5) thought experimental (6) social contract theory of universal subjectivism, will render universal subjectivist justice, which is quite different from the moral intuitions of most of us. The theory can be used to strive for less suffering, more sustainability and more happiness. Universal subjectivism can function as a moral compass. We have to rethink deeply our basic notions and moreover we need the courage and stamina to change our life styles and work towards a better world. Doing nothing makes us accomplices of a harmful world. It won’t be easy, but do we have a choice?

‘What can we do? How can we protect the environment?’ asks Francois Michel in his book \textit{Ecology and the Environment} on the environmental crisis, he continues:

\begin{quote}
Everyday we have to make an effort to do little things to care for our surroundings. We also need to learn about nature so we can be more respectful of it. This means paying attention to what is happening to the world around us. […] Energy sources contained in the soil, such as coal, oil and natural gas, are non-renewable and will probably run out within the next few decades. Besides, they cause pollution and contribute to the greenhouse effect. Heat, light, water and wind are all renewable energy sources.
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[802] Grayling (2009: 209)
\item[803] See Rockström (2009).
\item[804] Bender (2003).
\end{footnotes}
Renewable means they will be available to us as long as the sun exists. Non-renewable or renewable – the choice is ours.\textsuperscript{805}

The basic problems of the environmental crisis can be explained to children. The quote from Michel’s book, \textit{Ecology and the Environment}, is a children’s book. The problem is easy to understand. The solution is also easy to understand: we should live sustainably, that is living without harming future generations. But solving the problem is nearly impossible, due to the tragedy of the commons. Our society and our lifestyles would look quite differently if we were to take living sustainably seriously. Living ethically is not easy. And we don’t do it.

\textbf{7.2 Deep Pessimism or Desperate Optimism}

We harm others. With the possible exception of a vegan living a frugal life trying hard to reduce his or her harmful impact on others and the environment, we all harm others. Harm is institutionalized in our society. Our way of life - consumerism and an economic system dependent on growth and depletion of nonrenewable natural resources - is based on harming and exploiting others. We harm people in developing countries, we harm animals, we harm future generations and we even harm ourselves. We are living in \textit{victim societies}. We are doomed to perish in the not so far away future. Each and everyone has the choice either to be part of the problem, or to be part of the solution, even if there is no rational hope for a sustainable solution. I am also deeply pessimistic because I have not even managed to convince myself to live in voluntary simplicity. Though I am (almost) a vegan, ride my bicycle and use public transportation, try not to fly, buy as much as possible fair trade and organic products; I am also a modern consumer, with an abundance of luxuries such as clothes, books and gadgets. My ecological footprint is too large to be sustainable. Also I am not donating as much money, time and effort to alleviate poverty and other ethical causes, as I could. In other words, I find it difficult to give up my undeserved, unsustainable, unjustifiable privileges of harming others in order to egoistically live my consumerist life. Thus, there is reason for pessimism, deep pessimism.

So, what do we do? Tim Jackson ends his book \textit{Prosperity without Growth} with a to do list, or, more accurately a don’t do list:

Change can be expressed through the way we live, the things we buy, how we travel, where we invest our money, how we spend our leisure time. It can be achieved through our work. It can be influenced by the way we vote and the democratic pressure we exercise on our leaders. It can be expressed through grass-roots activism and community engagement. The pursuit of an individual frugality, a voluntary simplicity, is considerable.\textsuperscript{806}

Business as usual is not an option. But we will probably do it anyway and we will experience collapse happening before our eyes, or the eyes of our descendents.

\textsuperscript{805} Michel (2009: 60-65).
\textsuperscript{806} Jackson (2009: 204).
and other future generations. There is a difference (unfortunately) between what we do, and what we should do. This *motivational gap* is the cause of our collapse, which we have seen coming. Many people know and acknowledge that their own lifestyle is not sustainable, but they do not change their life style accordingly. What can people motivate to become vegans (intense factory farming being a major cause of CO2e emissions), stop driving a car, insulating their houses, stop flying, and, in general, live sustainable? Being a writer, teacher and campaigner, I have not succeeded in motivating many people to change their life styles. Some students become vegetarians, especially after watching the ‘meetyourmeat’ video (it seems psychologically animal suffering takes precedence above the environmental reasons for veganism). But what could possibly motivate those who have all the knowledge and all the arguments available? It is this problem, the failure to motivate green behavioral change, that will lead to our downfall, to environmental collapse. We sing our own requiem. For example, the blue fin tuna, one of the world’s largest fish, is on the brink of extinction, mainly because of people graving for sushi and sashimi, particularly in Japan. And not only tuna. If we continue to fish as we do now, around 2050 there will be no more wild fish in the oceans. In 2010 the UN Environment Program stated in their preview of the Green Economy Report that: ‘Marine fisheries around the world have been devastated over the years to the extent that the FAO\textsuperscript{807} believes that only about 25% of the commercial stocks, mostly of low-priced species, are currently underexploited. Studies estimated that by 2003, some 27% of the world’s marine fisheries had already collapsed in the sense that their current catch level was less than 10% of the maximum registered catch. Extrapolating these trends, these studies predict that virtually all of the world’s commercial fisheries will have collapsed before 2050.’\textsuperscript{808}

Clive Hamilton writes in his *Requiem for a Species* about the psychology of coping with fear. According to him, grasping the coming human made apocalypse will cause despair. But we will have to cope with this despair. We will have to accept it. It is just like when the doctor has explained to you that you have a lethal illness: you will have to accept it and try to cope. We will have to act. Harder than ever, we have to work to ameliorate suffering.

Environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott argues for ‘desperate optimism’: ‘There is no survival value in pessimism. A desperate optimism is the only attitude that a practical philosopher can assume.’\textsuperscript{809} In spite of the brute facts of reality, and despite the fact that the chances for a happy for all solution are implausible, we have to stay optimistic and strive for a world with less harm. We go through the cycle of despair, acceptance and act. Acting is important. We should beware of the risk of fatalism, cynical nihilism and ostracism. Let’s be desperate optimists.

\textsuperscript{807} Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
\textsuperscript{808} See: www.unep.ch/etb/publications/Green%20Economy/GER%20Preview%20v2.0.pdf.
Some dire problems have easy solutions: if people would stop to eat and buy tuna (or fish in general), the overfishing would stop. But it is highly unlikely that consumers will stop buying what they like. We will eat all the blue fin tuna to extinction. And other fish and whales will follow. The majority of people seem immune to critique on their life style choices. We consume ourselves to extinction. The power of marketing and consuming is much stronger than moral reserve. James Garvey writes that ‘Failing to act in accordance with moral reasons when you have them is something probably worse than meaninglessness.’ The tragedy of the commons will soon be a disaster of collapse.

‘The ‘majority’ is clearly not right about a lot of things, probably most things,’ muses theoretical psychologist Nicolas Humphrey. Kurtz has a more optimistic view on the problems of the human condition: ‘I do not hold a doctrine of original sin. I do not believe that human beings are born depraved. Nor do I hold the contrary naïve view that all human beings are by nature good, that they naturally seek the good, and that sin is simply due to ignorance. Human beings are neither good nor evil, but are capable of both.’ Universal normative theories and pleas for moral (re-)education have a totalitarian tendency. Characteristic of totalitarianism is that the State demands total submission through secret police, propaganda disseminated through the media, the elimination of open criticism of the regime, and use of terror tactics. Totalitarianism is the antithesis of an open society in which the freedom of the individual is the central aim. In an open society the state works for the benefit of the individual citizens. In a totalitarian state, individuals have to oblige to the state (a political party, or a dictator) for the interest of the State, not the citizens.

Universal subjectivism yields an open society. Literature and (documentary) films can be consciousness-raisers about exactly why it is so much better to live in an open society than in a totalitarian society where Big Brother is watching you, for example the classic Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell, and the movie Das Leben der Anderen (2007) by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck about the Stasi in the DDR terrorizing and spying on people in their private lives.

Universal subjectivism as a procedure is not democratic, because by democratic procedures (if they are not limited by a constitution) a majority could rule over a minority. Universal subjectivism is a conceptual model for consensus (like Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative acting). Consensus of opinion will necessarily arise from the hypothetical possibility of each form of existence. Because, in principle, you could have been anyone, you will have to take other positions into account. Because everyone has this moral perspective in this model, this will

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810 Garvey (2008).
813 See Popper (1971).
814 Paradoxically, the universal subjectivist method is not democratic, but the outcome will be that a democratic government is the best possible way to organize a state in such a way that freedom is ensured.
815 Most liberal democracies limit the power of the majority rule by a constitution, which sets the framework. But still the margins for majority rule could limit the freedom of individuals. Many democracies (like most States of the US) do not allow same-sex marriages.
necessarily lead to consensus of opinion about moral rules for living together in a
group and the distribution of wealth and scarce resources. Universal subjectivism will
procedurally optimize the possibilities for individual freedom and self-determination.
There will be large differences between abilities of imaginative empathy, but this is a
practical problem which society should try to solve. Opposition or indifference to
adopting universal subjectivism can only be overcome by acquirin an empathic
attitude, by means of education and a (liberal) cultural climate. There are no other
compelling reasons to be moral other than that we would all be better off. Universal subjectivism is a tool to help humans expand their moral horizon. It is
common to use glasses for better vision; likewise universal subjectivism helps to have
better moral vision.

Adopting a universal subjectivist policy would take demanding changes in
society. This makes it difficult to use it in practice. As political philosopher Darrel
Moellendorf remarks: ‘One could perhaps be forgiven for thinking that under the
present circumstances an egalitarian world order is impossible, especially given the
facts of international inequality and the resistance to demands for fundamental
change among those who most benefit from such inequalities.’ Universal subjectivist theory could be used in a pragmatic way as a leading principle for
piecemeal engineering. ‘If we cannot build a utopian society, at least we can
ameliorate the human condition’, Paul Kurtz remarks optimistically. Some are even
more enthusiastic about a more just and peaceful world: ‘Perhaps we are witnessing
the beginning of an era in which the claims of global distributive justice will gain
legitimacy.’ It is good to have hope, but it is unrealistic – like every beauty queen’s
dream - to hope for a just and peaceful future of the world with less suffering and
more happiness. Hoping is not enough; we all have to act.

In an interview Hochsmann asked Peter Singer if his ethical ideals are not too
difficult to attain because they would drastically change the way people live their
lives. Singer answered: ‘Does this mean that the utilitarian principle is a mere utopian
ideal? No, it remains the guiding source of our ethics, so it is not merely an ideal that
does not work. But does it mean that it is a demanding ethics that virtually no one
will entirely live up to? Yes, I’d accept that.’

When German philosophers of the Frankfurt School Horkheimer and Adorno
wrote their book in exile in the midst of World War II when the Nazis were gaining

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816 Of course, a small minority would benefit by not being moral at all, like all dictators. Game theory
shows that there is a difference between individual and mutual benefit (the prisoner’s dilemma). Cf.
Dawkins (1999). A political procedural theory tries to overcome the political variant of the prisoner’s
dilemma by arguing that most are better off if the model were adopted. In Good and Evil Richard Taylor
argues that there are no other than egoistic reasons for acting morally. Universal subjectivism is a political
form of what Bertrand Russell called ‘enlightened self-interest’.

817 Unfortunately there is a difference: a pair of spectacles improves your quality of life immediately. On
the other hand using universal subjectivism for moral vision might have consequences, which do not
improve but change your life style.


819 Thus writes secular humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz. As a humanist he stresses the human
condition, of
course, universal subjectivism is broader than the human species.


power, they considered their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (published in 1947) to be a letter in a bottle. Their book traced the rise of fascism and other forms of totalitarianism to the Enlightenment notion of ‘instrumental’ reason. The work’s pessimism reflects the defeats that progressive European social movements had suffered since the early 1930s. Fortunately they were wrong, despite the tens of millions of casualties, freedom prevailed, in the western world. This time chances for a victory of sustainability look small. The many eco-alarm books will be messages in a bottle; will there be people to read them?