

## Faith in the Future: Morality, Sustainability, and Humankind

B1796298, Darian Williams, Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies

### Summary

Sustainability has been an issue of increasing importance, and sustainable consumption is a key component that is repeatedly studied to achieve a sustainable future. Although knowledge about sustainability has been on the rise, this hasn't necessarily translated into sustainable behavior on the part of humankind. Past research has found that a major reason for this is because of extreme self-interest on the part of individual consumers, who seek immediate gratification. Because of this, I chose to focus my master's thesis on encouraging sustainable consumption with sustainability marketing methods.

My research topic led me to ask myself: Is humankind, as a species, morally capable of creating a sustainable future? This multifaceted question was best exemplified by *The Future of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Based on this book, I found that humanity's anthropocentrism and misplaced obsession with progress are perhaps the two greatest hindrances to realizing a viable, sustainable future. These two aspects have discouraged faith in our ability to create a long-term future. By assuming that we as a species are central and superior to other components of Earth's ecosystem, we have disregarded nonhuman elements of the environment. In addition, it has become commonplace to mistreat human groups that aren't as socially powerful as others. This has typically occurred in the name of industrial progress.

Rather than the common idea of what progress is, however, it could be argued that progress can take a different form. Rather than hyper-focusing on economic growth, which has generated a number of environmental and social issues, we can look holistically at systems and balance them sustainably. For this to occur, it is likely that we must collectively converge towards a single sustainable goal. This goal must be one that can emotionally and morally resonate with individuals in a way that encourages collective action. *The Future of Man* suggests that we must shed ourselves of our egos that allow us to exclude less powerful human groups and nonhuman species. We should instead strive for unification and solidarity, and encourage faith in our moral capacity to build a long-term future.

### Introduction

Sustainability has come to the forefront of public discourse in the 2010s, and has been doing so since roughly the 1970s. It is under this influence that I decided to get a master's degree in Global Environmental Studies after graduating with a Bachelor's in Anthropology. Specifically, I decided to focus on sustainable consumption and how to normalize it with sustainability marketing methods. I chose this topic because when environmental and social issues are looked at closely, the root of the problem is typically tied to economic practices. Put simply, the way we source ingredients for products and how we create or manufacture them is often done unethically (e.g. in terms of labor rights) and unsustainably (e.g. in terms of environmental impact.) This is due to an array of reasons, but one major reason is overconsumption, or excess demand for products.

I've focused my thesis on how to reduce overall consumption but increase sustainable consumption when shopping is necessary. Although I am half way through my research, I have doubts about the practical implications of my study and the sustainability field in general. The reason for this is throughout my research I have found past studies to support that the main hindrance to increasing sustainable consumption is extreme self-interest on the part of consumers. Rather than choosing sustainable options, we choose what is convenient and immediately self-satisfying. This, in turn, has significantly harmed the planet as well as social wellbeing for those who create what is consumed.

This is what's supported by the literature, but it is only the empirical knowledge we have. Although my research is empirically focused, sustainability is first and foremost a moral and theoretical issue. This especially pertains to discussing theories of the world, which inherently means discussing theories of the *natural* world. Therefore, what is the theory behind sustainable consumption? This is equally as important as applied research. And a key theoretical question regarding hindrances for sustainability is: We know humanity is capable of solving environmental and social issues, but are we willing to? My research is challenging me to ask myself if we as a species have the moral capacity to address such issues on a mass scale.

This dilemma is perhaps best exemplified by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's collection of works titled *The Future of Man*. This book revolves around de Chardin's faith in the future. Specifically, it is about awakening faith in the future among readers. Throughout the essay, he consistently questions the plausibility of a long term future for humankind (de Chardin 62). Taking an anthropocentric view, he refers to "the problem of man" as having the ability to strongly affect the future of Earth (de Chardin 58, 62). However, can we collectively and wisely decide how to address this future?

The questions he proposes in this book are similar to the moral questions of my thesis. In light of *The Future of Man*, I have found that anthropocentrism and an obsession with progress are the main human aspects blocking the creation of a sustainable future. The results of this book suggest that concern for each other and the nonhuman environment, which require converging towards collectivism and selflessness, are necessary to create a sustainable future. However, are we as a species morally capable of and willing to doing this?

Although de Chardin addresses this topic from the perspective of Catholicism and physics, I would argue that it could be looked at from a secular and sustainable perspective as well. While the issue of faith in the future may seem disconnected from sustainability on the surface, the two are actually directly tied to one another. Sustainability simply means creating a long-term future for upcoming generations. Therefore, having faith in the future is connected with having the moral capacity to create a sustainable (or long-lasting) future.

Whether he meant to or not, de Chardin spoke wisely of sustainability. For example, he posed the question, "Shall we ignore the problem to live on impulse and haphazard, without deciding anything?" (de Chardin 38) This exemplifies the current relationship between sustainability and humanity. Awareness regarding it is increasing, yet significant and collective action is yet to be taken. However, de Chardin also repeatedly spoke in a way that suggested he was plagued by the same ailment that makes unsustainable behaviors such a problem: a sense of human superiority.

#### Anthropocentrism

This sense of superiority, or anthropocentrism, seems misplaced considering humanity is simply another part of Earth's ecosystem. Despite that we may imagine ourselves as central and superior, we are merely one part of an interconnected system. This is exemplified by similar behaviors that can be found across species (including homosapiens), such as socialization and educational practices (de Chardin 29). It isn't fact that humans are central. Rather, it is our egos that make us think so, and this has become a moral issue (de Chardin 101). de Chardin notes this, but also contradicts himself by frequently suggesting that humanity is spiritually, morally, intellectually, and biologically exceptional.

As an example of this, he states that he considers "...the great superiority over Primitive Man which we have acquired and which will be enhanced by our descendents in a degree perhaps undreamed of by ourselves, is in the realm of self-knowledge..." (de Chardin 7) Therefore, his image of human superiority is due to our evolutionary history. Humanity has evolved to have intellectual capabilities, such as self-awareness, that is

more strongly developed than other species (de Chardin 7). Is this something that can be considered objective, though? What objectively suggests that structures such as language, education, and socialization, which many species (not only humans) are documented to have, are superior when done by homosapiens?

There may be no factual answer to this. However, as previously mentioned, our egos are a *moral* issue rather than a necessarily logical one. And it's a moral issue preventing us from working more strongly and rapidly towards a sustainable future. For instance, we have demonstrated a consistent willingness to sacrifice the nonhuman environment for human developments. Examples include reducing biodiversity through deforestation for natural resources and land use, and polluting air and water resources for industry purposes. In addition, we have often abused human groups that lack social power (e.g. indigenous populations, female populations, children) while committing these practices. Had we considered ourselves to be equal to nonhuman components of the environment, and to all human groups, this would likely not have become commonplace. To morally accept that we aren't evolutionarily superior would mean to look at these practices and completely alter them.

But we have done them anyway, and why is that? Perhaps it is because of one of the most prominent themes within *The Future of Man*, which is strongly tied to our deep-seated anthropocentrism, and that has created unsustainable industries and behaviors. That theme is the one of "progress."

#### Progress

In many ways, hyperfocusing on progress has perhaps been what has created unsustainable economies. We have created a system of excess consumption by focusing on progress in terms of mechanics and time. For instance, we have created sophisticated machinery that's purpose is to make products more efficiently. We've also created work systems in such a way that as many products as possible can be manufactured in the shortest amount of time. While this has enhanced profits, it is a system that contributes to air and water pollution from factories, labor rights abuses of those who work under strenuous conditions in such factories, and overproduction of products to feed overconsumption.

This does not suggest that progress should be shirked completely, however. Progress is an inherent element of talking about the future in general, and especially a sustainable future. But first, what exactly does "progress" mean? What can it be defined as? To de Chardin, it appeared to be human progress, which he seemed to have an outright obsession with. For example, his own concern regarding faith in humanity seems to be bent on whether or not we can progress, in a spiritual and evolutionary sense, further than

we had at the time that *The Future of Man* was published. He even goes as far to name humans the “children of progress” (de Chardin 59), and directly says,

*“By faith in man we mean here the more or less active and fervent conviction that Mankind as an organic and organized whole possesses a future: a future consisting not merely of successive years but of higher states to be achieved by struggle. Not merely survival, let us be clear, but some form of higher life or superlife.” (de Chardin 179)*

He does not mention the progress or future of non-human elements. Instead, his focus on the future manifested itself in “superhumans”, and in a futuristic, enlightened utopia he dubbed “the noosphere” (de Chardin 125-297). Despite his excessively human-focused take on progression, the noosphere is a unique concept that is relevant for sustainability. This is because it exists at least partially a result of human wariness regarding modern, mainstream behaviors and sentiments (de Chardin 10).

These behaviors and sentiments are a result of the modern mind often being struck by boredom (de Chardin 139). We ease this boredom by creating various desires. In many ways, our desires and misunderstandings of why we desire them is often channeled into consumption. This seems inevitable in some ways. If you desire something, that “thing” must be an object, and must be purchased and inherently “consumed”. However, we are dissatisfied with the type and level of consumption at present. Going even further, de Chardin states, “Hunger for material well-being is a hunger for higher being” (181).

To remedy this, he suggests that we channel our desires and beliefs towards progression, rather than wealth (de Chardin 132). Although his view of progression was spiritual, evolutionary, and anthropocentric, it can easily be seen in a different light. Reimagined, this progression could mean that we must move away from excessive consumption and towards concern over our long-lasting planetary and social health.

#### Collectivism & Selflessness

Then, how do we progress towards a sustainable future? If we look at present sustainability issues, they are a result of consumers behaving in similar, unsustainable ways on a mass scale. In short, we’re collectively unsustainable. The most logical to change to our behavior, then, would be to act collectively sustainable instead. As previously mentioned, however, individual self-interest tends to prevent this and serves as a major hindrance for sustainable consumption. In spite of this, we need collective action encouraged by selflessness.

This is not a new or unique concept. Convergence is, in many ways, a law of nature (Chardin 159). For example, there isn’t much on Earth, whether it be humans or

atoms, that makes significant progress or advancement as a singular being (de Chardin 6). de Chardin exemplifies this by saying,

*“Do we accept the idea, strongly supported by fact, that the individual man cannot achieve his wholeness (that is to say, reflect and personalize himself completely upon himself) except in solidarity with all other men, present, past and future?”* (222)

Therefore, we must draw together to achieve what is morally correct for future generations. But how is a “drawing together” to be accomplished (de Chardin 64-65)? Being forced to group together is not true unity after all, and can’t be sustained over the long term. Coercion, as has been noted throughout history, is a non-option (de Chardin 66). However, sustainability is inherently collectivist because it is something that affects everything on Earth. Furthermore, it’s an interdisciplinary field that requires a diverse set of expertise and viewpoints. Knowing this, we cannot avoid some level of group organization to achieve a goal of a sustainable future.

This goal can’t be achieved without hope that such a future can exist, of course. Therefore, to achieve this goal, we first need to possess a collective faith in the future (de Chardin 64). We must go forward with a sense of unification towards a single, common action (de Chardin 66). It is necessary to look passed our own narrow and individual view (de Chardin 84, 137) and consider a bigger picture to converge towards a collective sustainable future. This need for unanimity for the sake of sustainability is what will establish “a new environment of action” (de Chardin 148).

This new environment of action would involve humanity acting collectively towards a common sustainable goal. Rather than passively awaiting the manifestation of sustainability, we would actively work to realize it instead. This would manifest itself by humankind being active in reducing our individual consumption footprints. In addition, we would need to address sustainable production by finding innovative ways to create sustainable products and services when consumption does occur. We would have to assertively work towards creating societies, environments, and economies that are not only strong and consistent but also equal.

The next question, then, is how do we create a new environment of action? How do we encourage greater concern for each other and non-human elements of the planet to realize a faith in the future? These two components seem to be key for propelling humanity to take action for creating a long-lasting future. Perhaps they are difficult to achieve because, as previously mentioned, they require selflessness, which isn’t a behavior in humans that has been supported by research. Despite this, de Chardin is convinced throughout *The Future of Man* that humanity is capable of unity and is in the process of becoming more solidary (de Chardin 283). This hope is conditional, however;

it depends on two things.

First, humanity must have a common goal that directly affects individuals. This is crucial because aspirations, even strong aspirations, can only affect individuals if it is directly felt. If felt indirectly, it is inherently impersonal and dehumanizing (de Chardin 66). The issue would, therefore, lack critical value on an individual scale. Second, the nature of the common goal and how it is to be achieved. Rather than intellectual conversations or power plays, we need a "heart-to-heart" - a discussion based on morals rather than logic (de Chardin 67).

This heart-to-heart can only happen when we collectively, as a species, learn to be more empathetic. Empathy requires selflessness, which requires the suppression of individual egos (de Chardin 128, 207). To achieve this, perhaps we need some sort of epiphany that we are part of a larger system, rather than dominant beings at the center of it. As previously stated, homosapiens are part of the same Earth-wide ecosystem that everything else is. To realize this is to rid ourselves of our egos and grow more aware of, and therefore more empathetic towards, beings who are not our individual selves. This would include nonhuman beings, of course.

In some ways, we have begun to notice this and act on it. This has not always been true, however. Historically, we have acted as though our actions affect the small portions of the planet in which we inhabit. More and more individuals are increasingly aware of the fact that our various decisions are far-reaching and have consequences across a number of countries and human and nonhuman groups, however (de Chardin 7-9). The issue, then, is making this knowledge mainstream and delivering it in a way that touches individuals in a morally relevant fashion. This is the main topic of my research, and what has challenged me to ask myself if we are morally capable of achieving a sustainable future. Although this is not a question I found to be answered within *The Future of Man*, per se, de Chardin still had wise words to write on this topic, "Further ideological clashes and moral dimensions lie in wait for us as we go forward; and also further unions and further triumphs."

### Conclusion

Sustainability has been an issue of increasing importance and public awareness for some time, but has peaked in the 2010s. Sustainable consumption is one of the key issues that is repeatedly studied to achieve a sustainable future. While knowledge about sustainability in general has been on the rise, this hasn't necessarily increased sustainable actions. Past research has found that this is often because of self-absorption on the part of individual consumers, who seek to maximize immediate, individual rewards. Based on this, I chose to focus my master's thesis on encouraging sustainable consumption with

sustainability marketing and communication methods.

My research topic led me to question if humankind as a species is morally capable of taking significant strides towards a sustainable future. This question was exemplified by *The Future of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Based on this book, I found that humanity's anthropocentrism and misplaced obsession with progress are perhaps the two greatest hindrances to creating a viable, sustainable future. It is these two facets that have discouraged faith in the ability to create a long-term future. By assuming that, as a species, we are central and superior, we have disregarded nonhuman elements of the environment. In addition, it has become commonplace to mistreat human groups that aren't as socially powerful as others. This has typically occurred in the name of industrial progress.

It could be argued, however, that progress could take a different shape and form. Rather than hyper-focusing on economic growth, we can look holistically at systems and balance them sustainably, with a focus on economies, environments, and societies. For this to occur, it is likely that we'll need to converge towards a collective, sustainable goal. This goal must be one that can emotionally and morally resonate with individuals in a way that encourages collective action. *The Future of Man* suggests that we must shed ourselves of our egos that allow us to exclude less powerful human groups and nonhuman species. We should instead strive for unification and solidarity, and retain and encourage faith and hope in our moral capacity to build a long-term future. While it can't be said that the question my research has been forcing me to ask myself has been answered, de Chardin certainly had a number of relevant theoretical ideas in *The Future of Man* that can be applied to generating faith for the creation of a sustainable future.



References

de Chardin, P. T. (1964). *The Future of Man. Translated From the French by Norman Denny*. London: Collins.