

Re-imagining the Anthropocene by Examining Sustainability Culture Through the Lens of Paradox

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Abstract

In this Critical Reflection I seek to re-imagine the Anthropocene and its ecological crisis through a change of basic narrative from logic to paradox. Based on the proposition that the concept of culture plays a crucial role in understanding the sustainability crisis, I propose that the narrativization of the meaning of culture, as it plays its role in sustainability, may need to be changed in order to better serve the purpose of understanding our experienced Anthropocenic life situation. After discussing how the perspective of traditional logic is failing us in this quest, I examine the ideas of paradoxical lifeworlding and the Buddhist philosophical construct of the Two Truths Doctrine. I argue that the concept of living in the space between two paradoxical truths may form a better way of imagining how and why we can create a belief system that allows us to live and work sustainably. Finally, I discuss humankind's next sustainability challenge.

Keywords: sustainability, Anthropocene, sustainability culture, Two Truths Doctrine, logic, paradox; Buddhism

Introduction

While exploring what re-imagining the world in the Anthropocene could look like from a (trans)culturally informed perspective of sustainability, I realised that it can be summed up by a famous quotation from a season one episode of *Star Trek*, spoken by Spock: 'It is not life as we know or understand it. Yet it is obviously alive; it exists'. This line (often misremembered as 'It's life, Jim, but not as we know it') reflects life in the Anthropocene: still obviously life, but not life as we have previously lived it. It is this gap between living in the world as it now is and understanding the culture that permeates it which this Critical Reflection seeks to explore.

In my Introduction to this special issue I argued that the answers to the question of why 'we' as a collective cannot live more sustainably despite all our technological progress are found in how we form our culture and how we relate to the technology that gives us our comforts. The concept of Sustainability Culture is defined by questions like, 'Which values do we have? How do we think the world works? Do we really want to be sustainable in our daily lives and work, no matter what?' Here, I examine the role and importance of the formation of a cultural framework in which the Anthropocene is embedded, of the sense of interconnectedness and common-ness that we all share, expressed by a sense of belonging to the land, our (local) environment, and more broadly, to this Blue Planet, beautiful Earth. This sense of belonging or responsibility encourages people to believe that sustainability is important but also to behave in ways that actually support sustainability.

I focus on how the Anthropocene can be narrativized in such a way that we can effectively reach a culture of sustainability. Central to this debate is the reframing of the narrative, from an emphasis on differences to one on our commonalities. I argue that logic as a narrative driver needs to give way to the concept of paradox. The purpose of this journey is to seek access to a cultural space that encourages finding new commonalities (**Welsch, 2009**). This is also the space where a new culture may arise, the culture of wanting to live sustainably no matter what, or Sustainability Culture. In his book *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh sees the Anthropocene as a crisis of narrative and delivers a call for a new narrative to fight climate change (**Ghosh, 2016**). Through re-imagining and re-narrativizing the Anthropocene in this way, as the birthing ground of Sustainability Culture, I explore how to address the planetary emergency through (trans-)cultural thinking, furthering the debate on how 'glocal' culture, reflecting both local and global considerations, defines our drive and thrust toward sustainability from an interdisciplinary approach.

The Breakdown of Logic and the Rise of Paradox

It is obvious from the current state of the Anthropocene that the solutions to climate catastrophe proposed so far—in particular, ones that depend on proper government support—are not working. This shows from the collective inertia on climate change as well as the failure of world leaders to firmly commit to phasing out fossil fuels at the most recent UN Climate Change Conference, COP30. If we take the continuous rising of greenhouse gas emissions as the yardstick, it shows that governments are more or less refusing to develop effective efforts in forming a cooperative cultural norm of sustainability. Most national governments are in fact setting the opposite example by continuously and heavily subsidizing oil and gas industries and promoting increased fossil fuel extraction and development of new oil and gas licenses to boost their local economies. Governments award extraction, exploitation and natural destruction, promoting a system that goes directly against the framework of sustainable development goals (SDGs). The United Nations tracking system notes that only approximately 17 percent of all SDG indicators are on track for realisation by the deadline year of 2030 (**United Nations, 2024**). On top of all this, United Nations University recently announced that, based on their findings, as of 2026 the world has entered ‘water bankruptcy’, a stage of world water management where ‘more and more river basins and aquifers are losing the ability to return to their historical “normal”, and where droughts, shortages, and pollution episodes that once looked like temporary shocks, are becoming chronic in many places’ (**Madani, 2026**). Simultaneously, the size and number of data centres using fresh drinking water for their cooling systems is exploding worldwide.

From these findings it becomes clear that world leaders are failing to stop, induce a reversal of, or even mitigate climate change. The theory of cultural dynamics, which I explore in the Introduction to this special issue, proposes that the organisational or group culture in a community is of crucial importance to whether embedment of sustainability will be successful. Leaders need to set the example so people can perceive what it means for a community to live and breathe sustainability as a core value. There seems to be something lacking in the argumentation for the cooperative cultural norm of Sustainability Culture. This is the case because these inquiries are based on an outdated narrative of logic.

When Timothy Morton introduced the term ‘hyperobject’, he could have had the Anthropocene in mind: it is a perfect illustrative example of ‘an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it defeats all our traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place, and because of that, it can simply not be grasped in its depth of meaning, causes, and consequences’ (**Morton, 2013**). It seems obvious that the traditional rules

of logic do not help us understand the phenomenon of the Anthropocene, and so we cannot grasp its depth of meaning or consequence. Once we realise that the Anthropocene as a phenomenon *defies* logic, we can start to appreciate that it is greatly paradoxical by nature. How else would we explain how we find ourselves an all-powerful geological force that cannot seem to put an end to or even stave off the catastrophic unfolding events that we—at least the ‘we’ of the so-called ‘developed world’—have incited. Crucially, we know we are running towards self-destruction, but we don’t seem to be able to do something about it (**Richard, 2024**).

In the disciplines of environmentalism and eco-criticism, there has been much discussion about how people seem to have a different sense of responsibility regarding the local effects of their actions and the effects of their actions at a distance, as well as a different sense of belonging between their local communities and any so-called global community. According to Ursula Heise, these gradations of belonging show the importance of ‘a sense of place as a basic prerequisite for environmental awareness and activism’ (**Heise, 2013: 05**). People seem to need proximity to care, what Zygmunt Bauman terms a ‘morality of proximity’:

*[T]he morality which we have inherited from pre-modern times—the only morality we have—is a morality of proximity, and as such is woefully inadequate in a society in which all important action is an action on distance [...] Moral responsibility prompts us to care that our children are fed, clad and shod; it cannot offer us much practical advice, however, when faced with numbing images of a depleted, desiccated and overheated planet which our children, and the children of our children will inherit and have to inhabit in the direct or oblique result of our collective unconcern (**Bauman, 1993, as quoted in Heise, 2013**).*

It is this ‘morality of proximity’ that clouds most people’s awareness of the reach of their actions. More bluntly, people find it difficult to care about the consequences of their actions if they cannot see or feel the results directly in their local environment.

As I have previously argued, if we truly seek to understand the reality of the Anthropocene we can no longer rely on the narrative provided by logic. Rather, ‘all logic—meaning our habitual linear and causal thinking of a plus b makes c—must be left behind’ (**Richard, 2024**). Logic is based on thinking in opposites and premising that only one of these opposing outcomes can be true simultaneously. If there is duality, truth can be found by viewing it from only one of the dual perspectives at a time. Classical logic is what governed the ‘Business as usual’ (BAU) behaviour of the twentieth century, which led us to the Anthropocene, but it cannot be used to extract us from it.

As we shifted into this epoch, we have moved away from logic into a lifeworld of paradox. In the previous lifeworld, constructed by logic, we would not allow our actions to knowingly lead to the extinction of our species and do nothing to stop it. The logical approach would not allow two seemingly exclusive truths to be considered true at the same time. However, when following a narrative based on paradox, the seemingly contradictory behaviour of the Anthropocene becomes understandable. Such extremes are no longer exclusive but in fact work together as ‘polarities that create a state of tension in the in-between space’ (**Richard, 2024**). It is now in this space of tension where the truth of our existence lies: yes, we do know that unmitigated, massive over-consumption is a prominent driver of climate change, but we still get our takeaway breakfasts in single-use plastic containers before driving to work in our SUVs, topping up our petrol tanks as we go, preparing for stressful days trying to meet productivity demands. There is a philosophical model that exists which can help us grasp how thinking in paradoxical truths really works. The Buddhist Doctrine of Two Truths is a possible tool for developing more awareness of the paradoxical nature of the Anthropocene and can help us better understand how to establish a balance in the space ‘in between’.

The ‘Two Truths’ Approach

Nothing exists. Everything exists. Both propositions are true at the same time. This is a picture of reality that is constituted by (at least) *two truths* that co-exist simultaneously, absolute truth and relative truth (**Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999**). Under the Doctrine of Two Truths, our way of existence depends on how we can manage to oscillate between each while gradually moving towards one truth. This Eastern, non-hierarchical philosophy finds its complement in the Western postcolonial theory of transculturality as expounded by Fernando Ortiz and much more recently by Wolfgang Iser. In Iser’s idea of transcultural commonalities (**Iser, 2009**), once we have established that several levels of truth can exist simultaneously, a transcendent awareness can arise that moves us into the space in between these levels, where we can overcome boundaries or borders (**Iser, 2001**).

When asked to visualise the lived reality of the space in between two valid truths, which thought would arise in our minds? In his volume on the lives of great Tibetan Buddhist masters, Tulku Thondup recounts a story about the first Dodrupchen Rinpoche (1745–1821 CE). One day, as he was traveling through the region of Dege, Tibet, Dodrupchen Rinpoche came upon a river that was deep and wide, with strong currents and unassailable banks. He eyed the horizons in both upstream and downstream directions but could not see any possible places to cross. He decided to enter into

deep meditation to see the river in his mind *as earth* and proceeded to walk across the river as if walking on land. As he was about to reach the far riverbank, a thought sprang into his mind: 'Oh, my meditation is quite good'. Right there and then, Dodrupchen Rinpoche dropped into the river and almost drowned. From that moment on, he kept on saying that 'thoughts are dangerous' (**Thondup, 1996**). We may hold a thought or belief in our mind, but we run the risk of losing it by the mere act of recognising our efforts of doing (as opposite to the state of our being). This is the process of oscillation between two levels of truth, absolute and relative: in the absolute truth realm, there is no river to cross and we can walk on land, but in the relative truth realm, we will drop into the water. This exemplifies the Buddhist Doctrine of the Two Truths, which Thich Nhat Hanh describes as follows:

According to Buddhism, there are two kinds of truth, relative or worldly truth (samvriti satya) and absolute truth (paramartha satya). We enter the door of practice through relative truth. We recognize the presence of happiness and the presence of suffering, and we try to go in the direction of increased happiness. Every day we go a little further in that direction, and one day we realize that suffering and happiness are 'not two' (Thich, Nhat Hanh, 1999, 121).

Buddhist philosophy is obviously a vast field of study, and I will not claim that any discussion of it for the purposes of my argument here can be either complete or comprehensive. All I mean to establish is a working knowledge of the operational mechanism of paradoxical being. For this, a basic understanding of how to experience simultaneous awareness of two different levels of truth will be necessary.

In order to get to this point of understanding, the Buddha advocates a perspective where we are in a state of 'not too loose and not too tight'. Called the 'Middle Way', this philosophy allows for something in between 'nothing exists' and 'everything is real'. To further explain this, the Buddha introduces a multi-level sense of reality where opposite experiences can be true simultaneously depending on which level of awareness we see them in. When asked how to look at the question of existence by King Menander, an ancient king of what is now Pakistan, the Buddhist sage Nāgasena answered that he himself, Nāgasena, does not exist. Questioned further by the disbelieving king, Nāgasena proposed the famous analogy of a chariot, which does not exist in any other way but as the sum of its parts. By taking it apart, it ceases to be a chariot. So where did the chariot go if the parts are still there? The chariot is nothing but a concept, a conventional designation to indicate something in need of a name. In its deepest sense, it has no existence in itself.

The great learned Buddhist scholar Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419 CE) dedicated several chapters to this concept in his canonical work *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Tsongkhapa concludes that ‘the person lacks intrinsic nature’, and the ‘self’ does not intrinsically exist (**Tsong-kha-pa, 1402, vol. 3: 280**). Yes, I can say that my ‘I’ seems to encompass my body, my feelings, my mind, my thinking, but where is the ‘I’ exactly located? Every part of my body seems to be included in my ‘I’ as far as I can sense them, but my ‘I’ is not to be found in any one body part specifically. The same goes for my feelings and my thought. Even science cannot agree on the exact location of my mind or my consciousness. Tsongkhapa concludes by creating the paradox of opposite truths: there is no foundational self that can be known, but the self as psychological construct is real. In the sense of absolute truth, there is no self. From the perspective of the relative truth, we know a self in some way. And both are true in their own realm of awareness.

We can analyse any object by applying the same reasoning. Think of a simple table. We all know what a table is; we generally picture a hard flat surface, traditionally made of wood, supported by several legs spread apart. But what is it really? Does it exist as a table on a molecular or atomic level? Most certainly not like anything that looks like a table. If we consider all this as we go through daily life, we can try to imagine what it may feel like to experience the truth of (lack of) existence on two different levels at the same time, or as the Buddha calls it, emptiness. We may also call it the tension created by two opposites in the space in between.

Conclusion

Upon further examination, a conundrum that starts off as a paradox (for instance, nothing exists, yet everything exists) turns into a process of truth-finding by exploring the liminal space of being created by the tension between two apparently opposing forces. The existence of this space argues that the logical approach embeds a false sense of dualism. By recognising this, it is my hope that the paradox of the Anthropocene can be addressed. It holds the key to its own dissolving by entering the space of being in between, where two seemingly opposite truths can be held together in one equal awareness (**Richard, 2024**).

The *Star Trek* (mis)quote can be seen as a reflection of these two levels of truth: yes, the Anthropocene is a lifeworld, but it is not life as we know it. It is about living with paradox, where the local is global and the global, local, just perceived from a different level of awareness. If we understand that there is no separation between the local ‘us’ and the planetary ‘us’, and realise the world works simultaneously on micro and macro levels, then our vision will be one of shared responsibility and our values will be oriented to reshaping our lives to be more sustainable. When this

happens, a sustainable, human-made environment is possible. The task that Sustainability Culture sets for us is, in essence, an exercise in moving beyond borders and differences to focus on our commonalities, balancing two levels of truth that logically cannot exist together. As such, the Anthropocene 'marks the end not of comprehension of our environment, but of the old concepts of culture and logic that are being used to define the Anthropocene largely up to this moment' (Richard, 2024).

By practicing life in this way, a culture can develop that not only values sustainability structurally but will also allow us to integrate these values into our daily actions. It will foster a cultural perspective where we both feel proximity to our local environment and feel responsibility for the effects of our actions even if we cannot directly see them. On the relative level of cultural truth, we all form different groups, tribes or nations. But on the absolute level of cultural truth, we share a transcultural way of life. The more we can move into that space of sharing and commonality, the more we will all be able to live and work sustainably. Humankind's next sustainability challenge is not to develop more technology or even to find a more harmonious relationship with nature. It is to develop a sense of transcultural commonality among human beings on a planetary scale, without which there can be no common cultural norms that will bring us in sustainable harmony with ourselves, the Earth and nature.

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