

# BIOCENTRISM, SUSTAINABILITY AND ALTERITY ETHICS

## *BIOCENTRISMO, SUSTENTABILIDADE E ÉTICA DA ALTERIDADE*

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**ABSTRACT:** The research aims to analyze the connection between sustainability and biocentrism in the construction of an ethics of Alterity, highlighting its approximations and differences. The human being uses the environment for his development – economic, social and technological. However, a change is needed to reduce the unrestrained consumption of the nature elements, as this lack of control can lead to the extinction of the human species and other forms of life that inhabit the planet. One of the solutions for the preservation of nature is to put sustainability into practice individually, thinking about the collective. In This article, a wide qualitative research of bibliographic character was carried out, using deductive reasoning.

**KEYWORDS:** Alterity; Biocentrism; Sustainability; Life; Environment.

**RESUMO:** O artigo tem por objetivo analisar a relação entre sustentabilidade e biocentrismo na construção de uma ética de alteridade, ressaltando as suas aproximações e diferenças. O ser humano utiliza-se do mundo natural para o seu desenvolvimento – econômico, social e tecnológico. Todavia, necessita-se de uma mudança, visando à redução do consumo desenfreado dos elementos da natureza, pois esse descontrole pode levar a extinção da espécie humana e das outras formas de vidas que habitam o planeta. Uma das soluções para a preservação da natureza é colocar em prática a sustentabilidade de forma individual, pensando no coletivo. Para o artigo foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa de caráter bibliográfico, com utilização do raciocínio dedutivo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Alteridade; Biocentrismo; Sustentabilidade; Vida; Meio Ambiente.

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction 2. Sustainability as a “paradigm” of the contemporary society 3. Biocentrism: a paradigm and reality 4. In search of an alterity ethics 5. Final Considerations.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

With the idea of guaranteeing well-being and healthy quality of life, Humankind explored the nature. In addition to the conditions that provide human survival, it is reflected in elements that are explored without any ethical or moral limitation, signaling human superiority over nature, with an enrichment or profit view. The result of this panorama is the unprece-

mented ecological imbalance, which resulted in a crisis of planetary dimension, debated since 1970 by developed and underdeveloped countries.

In the first moments of reflection on the impacts of human action in the natural world, with the discovery of the finitude of what integrates nature and natural resources, the human being sought a way to enjoy these elements with greater caution, to perpetuate his existence. This scenario, however, reflects the anthropocentric character of sustainable actions, as advocated by article 225 of the Federal Constitution of Brazil of 1988, among other international instruments, such as the United Nations Human Development Reports, published annually since 1990.

In this bias, the objective of the research is to analyze the categories Sustainability and Biocentrism and correlate them with the Ethics of Alterity. Sustainable development reveals the need for Alterity as a vector for the respect and care necessary to overcome the global environmental crisis. In this process, human beings and ethical actions are integral parts of the planetary biotic nucleus. On the other hand, as a species endowed with “rationality”, it is up to the human being, as a transforming social agent, to adopt effective legal and political measures to preserve the environment.

The research problem is summarized by the following question: Sustainability and Biocentrism are categories impacted by the ethics of Alterity? As a hypothesis, it is understood that sustainable human action represents the ethical duty to understand the other as a being combined with his ideal of suitable life; which inevitably depends on sound environmental conditions. Sustainability focuses on the preservation of life on planet Earth, in an intergenerational perspective that does not materialize without ethics, aimed at humans and non-humans. The approach method of this research is deductive and the technique is bibliographic.

## 2 SUSTAINABILITY AS A “PARADIGM” OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Assaults to the environment have historically been justified in the name of the need for human development and the pursuit of economic progress. These two factors were and continue to be the main causes of environmental degradation, and represent the evident prioritization of only anthropocentric interests.

To resize this situation, sustainability is a category discussed by environmentalists worldwide. Postures can be more or less radical, but all seek the balance and harmony of human experience and development, healthily, with the natural world.

Initially, in the 1960s, Rachel Carson presented impactful data and perspectives in the work called “The Silent Spring”. The reflection of the author and scientists in the world resulted in an international political agenda dedicated to this topic, as the first signs of crisis began to impact developed countries. As Enrique Leff says,

Environmental awareness emerged in the 1960s with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and expanded in the 1970s, after the United Nations Conference on the Human En-

vironment, held in Stockholm in 1972. At that time, the limits of economic rationality and the challenges of environmental degradation to the civilizing project of modernity were highlighted. (2001, p. 16)<sup>1</sup>

The result of this movement was numerous documents aimed at environmental preservation, for example, the Declaration of the Environment from the United Nations Conference (1972), the Kyoto Protocol (1977), the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), the principles of Agenda 21 (1992), among others.

One of the most important documents is the Brundtland Report, which described the need for a human stance to stop the process of worsening the environmental crisis. Bosselmann explains that most of the report was developed by ecological sustainability and presented a strong criticism of the expansion of impacts on the ecological bases of development. Besides that,

[...] went on to explain the forms of development of the rich countries and eroded the environmental resources that should be their bases of support and how environmental degradation compromises economic development [...] The report also notes that it is useless to deal with environmental problems without a broad perspective that encompasses the factors underlying global poverty and international inequality. The common interest in healthy environmental development cannot be promoted if there is a neglect of internal economic justice and among nations. The Brundtland Report is an appeal for distributive justice globally among the rich and the poor, the nature of the people we live in today, and the future of human beings. This political foundation is summed up in the famous phrase. Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (BOSELMMANN, 2015, p. 50)

Since the Brundtland Report, worldwide, the theme has come to be a central axis; and the reflections intensified and were directed to global environmental degradation, mainly, but also to the discrepancies in economic and social development between the Northern Hemisphere and the South. Broadly, one can think of the North and South relationship as follows:

This is the current phase of capitalist accumulation, South, concerning the most advanced scientific-technical production in the North. The central statement is deprivation and the minimum state. The submission of politics to economic interests is accentuated, as demonstrated in the Persian Gulf war. The reduction of the role of the State and the reduction of investments and social spending are required; that is, fewer schools, fewer meals, less combating cholera, less basic sanitation, fewer popular houses, fewer public leisure places, etc. For the countries of the South, in general, historically poor, it is the imposition, by international financial organizations and by certain governments of the North, such as the USA, of a policy known as "structural adjustments. Structural adjustments mean articulating national economies with the demands of the market dominated by central capitalism. It is about modeling production according to the needs of consumer countries, located in the North, and building political, legal, and ecological structures that adapt to technolo-

gical innovations and consumption levels in central countries. For this purpose, the support of the purchasing classes of each country is ready to sacrifice the national sovereignty of their poor countries in exchange for participation in the material and cultural benefits of the opulent West. (BOFF, 2009, p. 44-45)

The Report also established that “sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the possibility for future generations to meet their own needs” (AZEVEDO, 1991, p. 46). In this sense, they are two key concepts present: that of needs and that of limitations. Need refers mainly to that of the poorest, which must be a priority. Limitation, on the other hand, refers to that “that the stage of technology and social organization imposes on the environment, preventing it from meeting present and future needs.” (AZEVEDO, 1991, p. 46) In this way, sustainable development meets human needs at present without compromising the needs of generations to come. In the concept, “need” was still instituted as those essential for the survival of humans, regardless of their economic conditions.

Due to the definition of the category in the Report, development must meet the basic needs of the human being, which can only be fulfilled within the ecological limits of a planet that has finite and exhaustible resources and elements. (BOSELNANN, 2015, p. 50-51)

Since 1970, the United Nations has been acting steadily to reduce planetary environmental degradation. In 2000, it established the Eight Millennium Goals<sup>2</sup>, as a goal until 2015. Among these, the seventh objective refers to “quality of life and respect for the environment”. In the same sense, several other movements have spread throughout the world, aiming at an integration policy aimed at caring for the environment, like for example, the Union of South American Nations - UNASUR -, formalized in 2008 as an integration block that aims to strengthen cultural relations, social, commercial, between 12 countries in South America<sup>3</sup>.

In Brazil, in 1981, with the enactment of Law 6,938, the National Environment Policy Law was instituted. From this moment on, several political and legal mechanisms and instruments became required and put into practice. Organs and institutes specific to the protection of the Brazilian environment and biodiversity were created, which, in 1988, were constitutionalized in article 225 of the Brazilian Constitution: “Art. 225: Everyone has the right to an ecologically balanced environment, a common use of the people and essential to a healthy quality of life, imposing on the Public Power and the community the duty to defend and preserve it for present and future generations.” This article raised the protection of the environment as a constitutional principle, aiming at the preservation of a healthy and balanced environment from an intergenerational perspective.

Article 225 is a right duty to preserve natural resources in favor of a balanced environment essential to well-being and quality of life. However, already in the preamble to the Federal Constitution, there is an indication of sustainable development as a “supreme value”:

We, representatives of the Brazilian people, gathered in a National Constituent Assembly to establish a Democratic State, designed to ensure the exercise of social and individual rights, the freedom, the security, well-being, the development, equality and justice as supreme values of a fraternal society, pluralistic and without prejudice, founded on social harmony and committed, in the internal and international order, with the peaceful settlement of disputes, promulgate, under the protection of God, the following (CONSTITUTION OF THE FEDERATIVE REPUBLIC OF BRAZIL, 1988).

Development, as a supreme value, is only established in conjunction with multidimensional sustainability. According to Freitas, sustainability is dynamic, and allows an infinity of theorization about it, as it has multidimensionality, and can also be studied in the ethical, social, political-legal, and economic dimensions (2012, p. 78).

For Freitas (2012, p. 78), the concept of development also incorporates the sense of sustainability under Articles 3 and 170 of the Constitution. Article 3 of the Magna Carta prescribes as a fundamental objective of the Republic the construction of “a free, just and solidary society”. These articles, if interpreted in conjunction with article 225, signal sustainability and, still, the continuous and durable development, aimed at the preservation of present and future generations (FREITAS, 2012, p. 144).

These legislative aspects mean an awareness of natural resources, which, over the years, only tend to decrease, due to their characteristic of finitude. Even if regenerative cycles are natural, human factors still cause significant impacts, like the increase in the population on the planet and the problems that result from this fact, like the scarcity of drinking water, the destination of solid waste, air quality in the main urban centers, the extinction of fauna species, among others.

Thus, human beings, as part of nature and endowed with rationality, have a duty to protect the environment, as human attitudes directly reflect the environment in which they live. In this sense, the human being must consider the fragility of all forms of life on this planet. For Lovelock (2001, p. 58), human actions are linked to the preservation of their species, and not to the preservation of Gaia, as it does not depend on the human being, but human life depends on it for its maintenance. Also, for the author, life on this planet is a very resistant, robust, and adaptable entity and human beings are only a small part of it (LOVELOCK, 2001, p. 58).

The journey towards the sustainable era will be guided by the precaution and preservation of natural elements, to guarantee the maintenance of life on Earth, in the face of the fragility of human existence on this planet. Sustainability, as a new political and legal paradigm, after 1988, is a vector for transformations in ways and lifestyles, based on the civilizing process and the development of human beings in harmony and balance with the elements that integrate the natural world.

### 3 BIOCENTRISM: A PARADIGM AND REALITY

Far from the intention of making human development unfeasible or aspects that show the improvement of human beings' lives, it is intended, in this research, to highlight that the exploration of an anthropocentric character is a determining factor for the degradation of the elements that make up the biosphere.

In this sense, in a character of superiority, the practice of speciesism is constant. The human race is instituted as rational and, therefore, above other species. New horizons of understanding for a sustainable era are not possible without breaking this anthropocentric perspective. This is the object of biocentrism, to the detriment of human beings as the center of science, technology, laws, political actions, among others. On the subject, for Oliveira it is a necessity, because “[...] the break with the anthropocentric view is not recent, it travels the timeline, it has always been present in philosophy, although in a minority way or without conquering so many hearts and minds”. (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p. 67)

Biocentrism is a paradigm that requires a considerable break. In Brazil, for example, the Federal Constitution is considered anthropocentric. Yes, some elements protect and preserve nature and natural resources, but these elements exist with a view to human well-being and not animal or natural well-being. Therefore, a paradigm shift, from the anthropocentric to the biocentric view, signals a break that can only be visualized through the ethics of Alterity.

An individualistic perspective only leads to more of the same, that is, to overcome the environmental crisis to provide quality of life and development conditions for humans. The emergence of a new perspective is based on the recognition of the value inherent to each living species in the biosphere and not only to instrumentally value species and natural elements. Sustainability also draws attention to this situation, in the sense of integration and balance between human beings and nature, where all beings are respected and considered for the value inherent to their living condition.

This line of thought directs the legal aspect to the rights of nature, or the possibility of natural elements appearing as a subject of rights in legal systems. This phenomenon is a considerable recognition and has already been achieved by the recent changes in the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. To give greater protection to nature - Pacha Mama (Mother Earth), the Constitution of Ecuador raised the environment to the subject of law, providing for the rights of nature in its article 71.

In that device, it is recommended that *“La naturaleza o Pacha Mama, donde se reproduce y realiza la vida, tiene derecho a que se respete integralmente su existencia y el mantenimiento y regeneración de sus ciclos vitales, estructura, funciones y procesos evolutivos”*. The Constitution of Bolivia provides for the right of animals in its article 33, which establishes that *“Las personas tienen derecho a un medio ambiente saludable, protegido y equilibrado. El ejercicio de este derecho debe permitir a los individuos y colectividades de las presentes y futuras generaciones, además de otros seres vivos, desarrollarse de manera normal y permanente”*.

The constitutional determinations of Ecuador and Bolivia are very important and stand out worldwide. It is a legal system with a view to biocentrism, capable of definitively breaking with the anthropocentric view that prevails in Brazilian constitutional law. Thus, with the evolution that has already occurred in some countries, it is observed that the world is going through a transition. These changes end up reflecting on the legal apparatus and the laws of each country. In the case of Latin America, considering and recognizing natural elements as subjects of rights are advances and achievements of indigenous peoples. Besides, biocentrism established, in these places, the concept of Plurinational State. Like this:

La promulgación de las nuevas Constituciones Políticas de Ecuador y Bolivia establecen el horizonte del buen vivir y vivir bien, respectivamente, y el concepto de “Estado Plurinacional” que emerge de la cosmovisión indígena originaria, describiendo la realidad de las diferentes naciones del Abya Yala, donde conviven diversas identidades de forma complementaria. Esto constituye un gran logro del movimiento indígena originario, que está dando pie a grandes debates para replantearnos la vida (HUANACUNI, 2010, p. 12-13)

For Zaffaroni, there is both an Ecuadorian and Bolivian legislation a view of the displacement of man as the center of the universe. This new legal paradigm has as its central idea the recognition of nature or Pachamama not as objects available to human beings, but as recipients of law.

Referring to human beings, nature, and animals as elements on an equal footing is, almost always, to enter into a complex and philosophical reflection regarding the condition of each being in the world. In addition to these discussions, it should be noted that the existence of Constitutions in South America with these perspectives represents a paradigm break that is fundamental and necessary for mutual recognition, so necessary to the logic of sustainable development, as a category established since 1970 when the first signs of the global environmental crisis drew the attention of developed countries. This legal recognition does not prevent, remove and not make the civilizing process and the evolution of the human being unfeasible. Acosta explains that nature's rights would not prevent fishing or livestock and Oliveira adds:

The problem is not fishing, but overfishing, because there is a harmful effect on the environment, it puts the species at risk. It stands against bullfighting, matadors in deplorable conditions, the massive breeding of animals in conditions of total irrespective of the quality of life. Acosta's vision has a name: well-being. An Ethics of Wellness. It is neither an Ethics of Rights nor the Utilitarianism of Interests. It is not morally acceptable to put a bull in a bullfight, but it is acceptable to eat the bull, as long as he has had a good quality of life. And a good death. In this wake, notions, and expressions such as humanitarian slaughter, green ox, sustainable fishing, and organic meat. Right to life? (OLIVEIRA, 2013, p. 73)

This consideration is relevant because practices and nomenclatures end up disguising the recognition of rights beyond human beings. To reflect on these attitudes is to reflect on sustainable development. It should be noted that in Brazil, non-human animals and nature are not classified as subjects of rights. Constitutional legislation and other legislation do not covers this situation.

According to item VII of article 225 of the Federal Constitution, it appears that non-human animals and nature have legal protections that defend their integrity, but do not have rights that may be required by themselves. Human beings, for example, as their holders, have the title to postulate the rights of non-human animals. In this sense:

Art. 225. Everyone has the right to an ecologically balanced environment, common use of the people, and essential to a healthy quality of life, imposing on the Public Power and the community the duty to defend and preserve it for present and future generations. [...] VII - protect fauna and flora, prohibited, in the form of the law, practices that put their ecological function at risk, cause the extinction of species, or subject animals to cruelty. (BRASIL, 1988)

The innovations of the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia show a human evolution based on the acceptance and recognition of the other, based on the teachings and practices of the traditional societies of these places. It is an ethics of Alterity capable of identifying the value inherent to each living being.

#### 4 IN SEARCH OF AN ALTERITY ETHICS

The need for the ethics of Alterity is fundamental when analyzing sustainability and the extension of rights to those who are not human beings. Legal science, instituted by the rationality that prevails in the regulation of social interaction and relations, is directed to the human being, in all its complexity.

However, Law, in an ethical perspective of otherness or Alterity, is extended to elements that integrate the natural world, as subjects of rights, as is already the case in Ecuador and Bolivia. The strength of the legacy and knowledge of traditional societies influenced this process, which may occur in other legal systems.

Bauman (1997, p. 44) clarifies that ethics and morals must be analyzed in the relationship of individuals, that is, to think responsibly towards the other, without requiring reciprocity. According to the author, moral responsibility should be 'rooted' in human beings, that is, it should be inherent to them. But in post-modernity, this task is a complex challenge.

Individualism and selfishness do not allow proximity and genuine experiences. However, "being together with" is a vector for responsibility to others, so necessary in times of liquid and disposable relationships. This panorama, when analyzed from an environmental perspective, also draws attention in the following sense: selfish and individualistic attitudes and behaviors do not allow care and responsibility for the natural world. These practices also do not allow considering what is not human as a subject of law. These are barriers that prevent human beings from realizing the need for a change in consciousness and attitudes to ensure the balance and harmony of the relationship between human beings and the natural world.

To share sustainability and a biocentric legal perspective, that is, also directed to other lives, the use of natural resources is not required to cease, but that there is a conscious use of what is decisive in human life because these elements are considered in the ethics of Alterity that this research proposes.



Thus, a change in the paradigm of human well-being, presented by this individualistic society and based on convenience, especially economic, is essential. Taking public sustainability policies, demonstrating moral responsibility towards other living beings is a condition to guarantee well-being for the present and future lives, human and non-human. The ethics of Alterity, recognition, and consideration of the other is also fundamental. In this sense, adds Morin “[...] you need to change your way. But it seems possible to modify certain categories and correct certain evils, we cannot fail to stop the technical-scientific-economic and civilization that is leading our planet to disaster”. (2011 p. 33)

The ethics of Alterity is a starting point in the construction of a fraternal and solidary look directed not only at human well-being but above all at the well-being of the elements that integrate the entire natural world. The capacity of conscience in this perspective is real and is already inserted in the legal context of several countries. Efforts in this direction reaffirm Morin's idea, which highlights the need for “[...] “Terra-Patria” conscience, a community of destination, it is also necessary to promote the development of the local within the global”. (2011, p. 35).

Following this conception, Zambam (2011, p. 32) explains that actions that demonstrate responsibilities need to be accompanied by the duty of solidarity with men and natural resources. However, the ethics of Alterity is also necessary, because, in synergy, balance, and harmony, one living depending on the other for the preservation of its existence.

For Bauman (1997, p. 67), Alterity aims at a more intense bond between individuals, a bond that does not have to be physical. It is a feeling of closeness to the other, which does not need to be close, but allows having that feeling. It is worrying and having responsibilities with the other without requiring reciprocity, as the anthropological bond is common.

Freedom, equality, and responsibility are rights to be exercised by the subjects. Adapting this reality to the ethics of Alterity, the contribution to environmental preservation can be more effective. In that same line of thought, for Aquino a:

[...] the Ethics of Alterity, proposed by Lévinas, recalls this posture of recognition of the Other as a Subject from the expression Another Other. The content set out in this statement rescues my responsibility towards the other person, as they are human beings. It is not a simple task to understand, as each Subject is an infinite path. Walking through these uncertain paths denotes an understanding of what it means - every day - to become more human. (2012, n/p)

Postures like these also enable the exercise of sustainable citizenship directed to the natural world, which allows, for example, the legal protection of the environment through collective actions or the intervention of the Public Ministry. Legal and political mechanisms are meaningful if experienced in the hope of the ethics of Alterity, solidarity, and fraternity. With the unsustainable use of natural elements, there is a need for a break in the way of acting and thinking to modify the global environmental crisis scenario. Biocentrism and the ethics of Alterity are categories that, if experienced, help in understanding the “common home”, as the human being needs other elements and living beings to achieve his well-being.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this research, it was pointed out that the understanding of the idea of environmental sustainability from the constitutional point of view requires mentioning the tension between protection of the environment and economic development. Despite the constitutional substrate for both ideas, the interpretation of care for the environment, the purpose of which can be understood from the objective stamped in art. 225 of the Constitution - an ecologically balanced environment - must allow a coherent and systematic positioning in the face of legislation that protects the interests of current and future generations.

One cannot disregard the elementary character of economic power in the face of society's attempts to break with the structure of production and consumption of goods and services. It means, in this sense, that the modeling of environmental protection through the developmental bias - coined from the notion of maintaining the conditions to produce and consume - is insufficient to think about ecosystem protection that effectively implies the reduction of harmful exploitation of the natural world.

Thus, a differentiated legal interpretation is a way of integrating the internal conscience of the Law in the face of the environmental problem, as is already the case in Bolivia and Ecuador. The concept of sustainable development, in this sense, should not mean an economist interpretation of environmental protection, but must bear in mind the imminence, relevance, and need for an ethics of Alterity capable of applying the Law, extensively to non-human elements and living beings.

Brazil, in its constitutional and nonconstitutional legislation, aims to protect the environment and its ways of life and, establishes in its constitutional objectives a more solidary society, with duties to others. It can be said that Brazilian legislation is advanced legislation by imposing constitutional protections on the environment and solidary society, but it still has a strong anthropocentric bias, aiming at well-being directed only at humans.

In this sense, to achieve the objectives proposed by sustainability, it is essential to experience the ethics of Alterity, as a vector to achieve sustainable development that will reflect on the future and well-being of living beings, in a fraternal, solidary, and biocentric perspective.

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