

SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL
HUMANS TO FLOURISH AND HEALTHY ECOLOGICAL
SPACE FOR NATURE TO FLOURISH

by

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DEDICATION

To all those who foster socio-ecological flourishing.

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ABSTRACT

In this master's thesis, I characterize socio-ecological justice as opportunities for all humans to flourish and healthy ecological space for nature to flourish. I presume socio-ecological flourishing to be an intrinsic good and argue that we have a moral obligation to promote this good. I suggest that the injustices of domination and oppression of humans and nature are major impediments to flourishing. I survey causes of domination and oppression and identify various agents that dominate and oppress. As for causes, of particular interest to this thesis is a logic of domination that sanctions domination and oppression as well as the orientations of hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism. I discuss some harms of domination and oppression to both the oppressors/dominators and the oppressed/dominated. Once I describe human and ecological flourishing and combine the two ideas to speak of a socio-ecological flourishing, I offer political, social, and educational pathways that can create the conditions for flourishing. The main argument herein is that socio-ecological flourishing is a collective good for the entire Earth community and that we have a moral obligation to foster it. Part of the work that this thesis does is bearing witness to much unnecessary suffering in this world that comes through domination and oppression while recognizing the possibilities for socio-ecological flourishing.

Keywords: humans, nature, social, ecological, socio-ecological, justice, flourishing, domination, oppression, political, educational, pathway

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of socio-ecological justice in this master's thesis echoes other discourses such as *buen vivir*,¹ Earth Jurisprudence,² and biocultural diversity conservation³ that assign moral worth to the entire Earth community and promote modes of being based on that view. It reflects the idea that the entire Earth community has intrinsic worth and deserves our respect and that fostering the conditions for socio-ecological justice is our moral duty. I characterize socio-ecological justice as opportunities for all humans to flourish and healthy ecological space for nature to flourish. I presume that socio-ecological flourishing is an intrinsic good and argue that we should foster it. I suggest that the injustices of domination and oppression of humans and nature are major impediments to socio-ecological flourishing and propose political, social, and educational pathways to achieve states of flourishing.

My conception of socio-ecological justice in Chapter 2 reflects existing notions of social and ecological justice. The social justice aspect echoes the capabilities approach framework, which advocates for creating optimal conditions for all people to realize their basic capabilities and realize their potential. The approach seeks the structuring of society's economic and political institutions in ways that permit everyone access to the material and social resources to develop a set of basic capabilities with which they can develop their talents, capacities, and potentialities and make a decent life. The ecological

¹ Rooted in the worldview of the Quechua peoples of the Andes, *buen vivir* expresses an ensemble of South American perspectives. *Buen vivir* is a way of doing things that is community-centric, ecologically-balanced, and culturally-sensitive (Balch, 2013).

² Earth Jurisprudence is a framework for law and governance that regards humans as part of the greater earth community. The framework assigns intrinsic value to all the entities in nature and tasks humans with the responsibility for creating the institutions necessary to promote the well-being of earth and all of its inhabitants (Koons, 2011).

³ Biocultural diversity conservation takes an integrated biocultural approach to understand the links between nature and culture and sustain biocultural diversity (Maffi & Woodley, 2010).

justice component refers to treating all non-human elements of the natural world with respect and leaving nature a fair share of healthy ecological space to flourish and realize its potential.

Introduced in Chapter 2 are the injustices of domination and oppression of humans and nature that impede socio-ecological flourishing. Chapter 3 elaborates on these injustices and identifies the various agents that perpetrate and perpetuate them. Chapter 4 surveys the causes of domination and oppression. Of particular interest to this thesis is the logic of domination that sanctions domination and oppression and the causes of hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism. Chapter 5 continues the discussion of the harms of domination and oppression to the oppressors/dominators and the oppressed/dominated. Chapter 6 takes up a substantial part of this thesis. In the chapter, I describe human and ecological flourishing and combine these ideas to speak of a socio-ecological flourishing and offer political, social, and educational pathways that can create the conditions for flourishing. The main argument in this thesis is that socio-ecological flourishing is a collective good for the entire Earth community and that we have a moral obligation to promote this good. I argue that flourishing requires attending to the call of justice so as to minimize the domination and oppression of humans and nature and further say that flourishing is achievable through more equitable sharing of natural resources and the cultivation of a moral consciousness that bends toward justice. Finally, part of the work that this thesis does is bearing witness to much unnecessary suffering in this world that comes through domination and oppression while recognizing the possibilities for socio-ecological flourishing.

2. SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

The concept of justice has a rich and vast history. The idea has multiple geographical origins and has persisted over millennia. It has been expressed in various cultures, governments, legal systems, and religious and secular societies around the world (Lauren, 2013). The call of justice is as relevant today as when it was first conceived. Justice was a chief concern of the earliest known legal code, the Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu, which emerged around 2100 B.C.E in the Middle East (Darling, 2013; Pryke, 2017). Among other meanings, justice held protecting the powerless from oppression by the powerful (Darling, 2013). The Far East was also a source of contributions to ideas about justice. The Chinese philosopher Kong Qiu, known as Confucius, whose life spanned the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., underscored the duty of doing no harm to others and respecting the intrinsic worth of all people. He advocated for laws that served justice and spoke out against oppressive governments (Lauren, 2013). In the West, around 380 B.C.E., the philosopher Plato explored the nature of justice and its relation to human well-being in the book *Republic* (Plato, 2004). In the same century, the philosopher Aristotle inquired into justice and injustice in his books *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (Aristotle, 1999a; Aristotle, 1999b). Others have followed. Many landmark thinkers of the Western civilization—Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls—have contemplated the concept of justice (Jost, 2020). And rightfully so, as the concerns of justice continued to be important in human affairs.

2.1 Social Justice

Varieties of justice include distributive, procedural, interactional, retributive, restorative, social, and ecological (Jost, 2020). I focus on social and ecological justice. As for the former, the nineteenth century witnessed a pronounced interest in performing a comprehensive assessment of the full range of social institutions with the aim of fairly distributing the advantages and disadvantages, or benefits and burdens, within a society (Johnston, 2011). In the 1874 book *Methods of Ethics*, philosopher Henry Sidgwick posed the important question, “Are there any clear principles from which we may work out an ideally just distribution of rights and privileges, burdens and pains, among human beings as such?” (1874, p. 247).

The first two major developments in social justice theory, which came into prominence in the nineteenth century, were the “principle of desert” and the “principle of need.” According to the principle of desert, a version of justice articulated by Aristotle and at the base of important concepts of justice prior to ancient Greek philosophy, people’s contributions to society determine what they deserve. In other words, the benefits enjoyed should be equivalent in value to the contributions. This idea still has a powerful hold on the imagination of many people. The principle of need, on the other hand, says that each person contributes according to their ability and receives according to their needs and breaks the proportionality requirement between contributions and benefits maintained by the principle of desert (Johnston, 2011). The principle of need was expressed by Marx in the context of envisioning a higher phase of communist society. As he put it, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Marx, 2008, p. 27).

The third major development in social justice theory took place in the twentieth century with the conception of justice as fairness. This new paradigm was advanced in philosopher John Rawls' 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* (Johnston, 2011). Rawls was concerned about how the major institutions of society contributed differentially to people's opportunities to flourish. He wrote, "The basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effects are so profound and present from the start" (Rawls, 1999, p. 7). In his view, the political, economic, and social circumstances of a person at birth greatly determine that person's starting social position, and differentials in starting positions between members of society could cause deep inequalities in initial life chances (Rawls, 1999). Referring to important social structures of society, Rawls wrote, "Taken together as one scheme, the major institutions ... influence ... [people's] life prospects, what they can expect to be and how well they can hope to do" (Rawls, 1999, pp. 6-7). In this work, I reflect Rawls' concern of all members of society having opportunities to flourish.

The twentieth century saw a fourth important development in social justice theory with the capabilities approach to justice. The contemporary version of the approach was initially articulated by economist Amartya Sen in 1979 at a Tanner lecture entitled "Equality of What?" (Robeyns, 2018; Sen, 2011). That question has framed much social justice discourse since then, generating a wide variety of answers, ranging from "welfare" (utilitarianism), "primary goods" (John Rawls), "resources" (Ronald Dworkin), "equality of opportunity for welfare" (Richard Arneson), and "equality of access to advantage" (Gerald Cohen). Sen's capability approach favored the conception of "capability to achieve valuable human functionings." Two other leading capability theorists are the

philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Elizabeth Anderson. While the versions of the capabilities approach differ among the three, common moral and political principles support their theoretical foundation. At the heart of the approach is the notion of creating the optimal conditions for all people to realize their basic capabilities. The focus of the approach as a theory of justice is to structure society's economic and political institutions in ways that permit everyone access to the material and social resources necessary to possess and exercise a set of basic capabilities with which they can develop their talents, capacities, and potentialities and make a decent life (Alexander, 2016). I echo the sentiments of the capabilities approach to social justice herein when referring to the fair distribution of opportunities to all members of global society to flourish.

2.2 Ecological Justice

The second concern of this work, ecological justice, became a more prominent feature of the terrain of justice in the twentieth century. This later arrival aligns with accounts of the expansion of the moral community, such as that of William Edward Hartpole Lecky, author of the 1917 publication *History of European Morals: From Augustus to Charlemagne*, who wrote, "At one time the benevolent affections embrace merely the family, soon the circle expanding includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world" (pp. 100-101). Moral concern for the nonhuman world, however, was not a novel idea of the twentieth century. Plutarch, a philosopher of the first and second centuries, strongly advocated for admitting animals into the moral sphere (Lecky, 1917). The growing ethical sphere of the West now also considers the interests of

non-sentient things, such as rivers, oceans, forests, and the land (Baxter, 2004). Other accounts suggest that human respect for nature “has been with humanity since we evolved” (Washington, Taylor, Kopnina, Cryer, & Piccolo, 2017, p. 35). Ecocentrism, a broad term for worldviews that recognize intrinsic value in both the biotic and abiotic components of the ecosphere, “has been an important theme [worldwide] for many individuals and some societies for millennia” (Washington et al., 2017, p. 39).

The field of environmental ethics emerged as a distinct area of philosophy in the 1970s at least partly in response to influential works such as Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* (1962), Lynn White, Jr.’s article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” and Garrett Hardin’s article “The Tragedy of the Commons” (Kawall, 2017). The term “ecological justice” appears to have entered the lexicon of ethics in 1995 in the edited book *Green Planet Blues: Environmental Politics from Stockholm to Rio*, with four essays on ecological justice (Conca, Albery, & Dabelko, 1995; Okereke & Charlesworth, 2014). Other foundational works on ecological justice include *Ecologism: An Introduction* (Baxter, 1999), *Justice, Society and Nature: An Exploration of Political Ecology* (Low & Gleeson, 1998), and *A Theory of Ecological Justice* (Baxter, 2004). Between his two books, Baxter forwarded the notion that the nonhuman world is worthy of moral consideration and that it should be accounted for in social, economic, and political systems. He also proposed that nonhuman beings have a claim to a share of the Earth’s resources (Baxter, 2004). As in his thought, “ecological justice” herein means nature having a fair share of healthy ecological space to flourish.

2.3 Socio-ecological Justice

The notion of socio-ecological justice refers to the web of just relations woven among humans and between humans and nature. Although I use the term “nature” to refer to the nonhuman elements of the natural world, I consider humans to be a part of nature. I distinguish humans from the rest of nature to facilitate a conversation about humans and their interactions with the rest of the natural world. “Nature” means plants, animals, rocks, and other such things that constitute the natural world. Returning to the idea of socio-ecological justice, the two currencies of justice in this work are opportunities for all humans to flourish and healthy ecological space for nature to flourish. The currencies combine to permit socio-ecological flourishing.

The boundaries of the community of justice then are the boundaries of the Earth, and its members include both living and natural non-living things. It would not be meaningless to include non-living things, such as dirt and rocks, in the community of justice. Prominent environmental ethicists have invited us to extend moral consideration to non-living things. Aldo Leopold, considered by many as the father of wildlife ecology, challenged us to include the land, which contains non-living things, within the contours of our ethical community (The Aldo Leopold Foundation, n.d.; Leopold, 1949). Leopold envisaged the land as an interactive and interrelated community of all the living and non-living things on it and enlarged the moral circle from the human community to the land community. This new ethic sprouted out of the desire to care for all the interdependent parts on the land for the benefit of the whole. For Leopold, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals; or collectively: the land” (Leopold, 1949, p. 204). The boundaries of Leopold’s ethical

concern coincide with the ones I am forwarding in this work. They include concerns about how we relate to the nonhuman world in addition to the human sphere.

Another figure that extended moral consideration to the non-living world is Holmes Rolston, III, widely recognized as the father of environmental ethics. Rolston argued for the intrinsic value of other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere that exists outside the human valuer (McDonald, 2004; Posas, 2010). In his book *Environmental Ethics: Values in and Duties to the Natural World*, Rolston pushes back against the idea that nature does not have intrinsic value. For him, a value theory that is more biocentric than anthropocentric is more appealing as it recognizes the inherent value of nature. As he puts it, “A ... more biocentric theory holds that some values are objectively there—discovered, not generated, by the valuer” (Rolston, III, 1988, p. 116). Unsurprisingly, Rolston opposes several prevailing Western notions. He rejects such views as

humans can have no duties to rocks, rivers, or ecosystems, and almost none to birds or bears; humans have serious duties only to each other, with nature often instrumental in such duties. The environment is the wrong kind of primary target for an ethic. It is a means, not an end in itself. Nothing there counts morally.

Nature has no intrinsic value. (Rolston, III, 1988, p. 1)

Rolston’s writing indicates his high regard for nature. It suggests that nature has intrinsic value and that it counts morally. Rolston derives duties to nature from various other types of values that pertain to it, such as economic, recreational, scientific, aesthetic, and religious (Rolston, III, 1988). From my perspective, if the various elements of nature are subjects to whom we have duties, they are a part of our community of justice. This means

that even the abiotic components of nature, for example, sand or stone, belong in our ethical field of view.

Another thinker who thought similarly as Rolston is legal scholar Christopher Stone. In a seminal work, Stone wrote in earnest, “I am quite seriously proposing that we give legal rights to forests, oceans, rivers and other so-called “natural objects” in the environment—indeed, to the natural environment as a whole” (Stone, 1972, p. 456). If we grant that legal rights assume the moral worth of subjects with legal rights, then the abiotic parts of the Earth are part of the community of justice. And we can say that we owe them something. I submit that the expansion of the moral community to the abiotic parts of the world is not an uncontested idea. Nonetheless, their inclusion is worthy of consideration. Jurisprudence professor Brian Leiter suggests as much in a discussion on where to draw the boundaries of our moral and legal communities when he writes:

But how far will the expansion of the moral community go? Will it come to include trees and plant life? Insects? The earth itself? You may think those cases far-fetched, and perhaps they are, but what has seemed “far-fetched” in moral matters at one time is often a poor guide to what comes to seem important at a later date. (Leiter, 2013, p. 525)

We have come far in the project of expanding membership in our moral community. If admitting abiotic parts of the natural world into the moral circle seems bizarre now, thoughtful consideration of ecocentric worldviews and an adoption of an attitude of reverence toward nature could alter that perspective. The framework of socio-ecological justice embraces the admittance of the entire planet into the moral sphere.

In a socially just world, each person in the City of New York, the country of India, and the continent of Africa, in fact, the entire globe, would have at least a few opportunities to realize their potential, whether moral, intellectual, social, athletic, musical, or otherwise. At minimum, a few pathways for self-development would exist for everyone even if there are inequalities in opportunities within and between cities, states, and countries. The overall result would be more fulfilling individual lives and more people contributing more to society, benefitting both individuals and societies.

In an ecologically just world, humans would also consider the welfare of the nonhuman sphere. A substantial amount of healthy ecological space would be left for nature to thrive. Biologist Edward O. Wilson suggested in his book *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* that humans set aside about half the surface of the Earth for nature (Wilson, 2016). The idea is to permit members of the nonhuman world, such as squirrels and sharks and bats and bears, to engage in behaviors natural to them and maintain their populations in thriving ecosystems. It would also allow for a healthy diversity in species and ecosystems and genetic diversity within species, elements considered necessary for ecological flourishing if we take ecosystem stability as a measure of flourishing (Center for Biological Diversity, n.d.). Moral consideration of the nonhuman sphere could also mean humans limiting the use of non-living things, such as sand and limestone, for purposes such as making glass and computer chips, so that other living things that rely on them may also flourish (Ludacer, 2018). I will discuss in a more robust fashion what flourishing can look like for both humans and nature in Chapter 6.

2.4 Injustices of Domination and Oppression

Compared to the concept of justice, the notion of injustice has received far less thought in philosophy and jurisprudence (Gross, 2011). However, in a conversation about justice, it seems appropriate to explore the opposing concept of injustice for its promise to inform the discussion. One may construe injustice broadly as breaches of duties of justice (Gardner, n.d.). I discuss here the injustices of domination and oppression.

A review of human history reveals an asymmetric human exercise of power to dominate,⁴ control, and exploit other humans and nature. Many individuals and groups have been subject to domination in all past and present societies (Lovett, 2010). The natural world has also been a target of human domination, especially since the beginning of the industrial revolution in 1760 (Pattberg, 2007). These types of oppressive relationships are a principal source of socio-ecological problems, such as poverty and pollution, and they harm both humans and nature. According to the harm principle proposed by philosopher John Stuart Mill, actions that harm others who are not causing harm are wrong. In Mill's view, the human right to self-determination has limitations. Regarding the exercise of power, he wrote, "[T]he only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (Mill, 1863, p. 23). Mill suggests that when power is exercised for another purpose, the harm principle deems it wrong. If we agree with this principle, oppressive human relationships fall outside the bounds of justice. We can extend this notion to oppressive relationships with nature as well. We can say that it is wrong to

⁴ Crucial elements of domination may be captured using other terms such as "oppression," "exploitation," "subordination," "subjugation," "marginalization," "subversion," and "othering." This work mainly uses the terms "domination" and "oppression."

cause harm to nature unless it occurs in the course of self-defense or meeting our basic needs in responsible ways. As for the former, we can say it is morally permissible to defend ourselves from a predatory animal even though that harms the animal. As for the latter, we can say that conserving energy and using energy sources that are less polluting to the environment are responsible ways of meeting our energy needs. Actions outside of this criterion of responsible ways of meeting basic human needs can be considered the domination of nature.

The principal reasons for dominating and oppressing other humans appear to be for acquiring the means to hyperconsume goods and services and for accumulating unnecessary wealth. The oppressive institution of human slavery was a means to satisfy both ends. Slavery in the Western world dates back about 10,000 years to Mesopotamia (A brief history of slavery, 2001). Leap forward to 1565, African slaves were present in Spanish Florida (Ellis, 2020). In 1945, the United Nations obliged member states to outlaw slavery (United Nations, n.d.). Despite that development, today, various forms of oppression keep large swaths of the global population from realizing their potential. An example is modern slavery which oppresses men, women, and children across the world (Global Slavery Index, n.d.; United States Department of State, n.d.). In the United States, oppressive systems, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and anti-Semitism, built into societal institutions, such as government, education, and culture, subordinate marginalized groups and elevate dominant ones (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.). While the causes of the domination and oppression of other humans may be multiple, the pursuit of unnecessary

wealth accumulation and the means to hyperconsume goods and services are arguably the main causes.

Human domination and oppression extend into the natural world as well. A primary reason humans dominate and oppress the natural world appears to mirror that of the domination of other humans. It seems to be for the purpose of accumulating more wealth or to secure more goods and services than is necessary. People ought to consider though that they share the Earth with a community of other living and nonliving things that deserve respect and may themselves require the planet's finite resources.

Sixty-five surveys have estimated the Earth's human carrying capacity to be between 500 million and more than one trillion people. Most estimates fell between 8 and 16 billion people. An important factor that determines the upper bound of humans that the Earth can sustain is resource consumption per capita (Dovers & Butler, 2015; Pengra, 2012). Taking these surveys into account, it appears that even at the current population level of about 7.9 billion, all humans can meet their basic needs by doing significantly less harm to other humans and nature than is the case now and still live good lives (Cumming, 2016; Dovers & Butler, 2015; United States Census Bureau, n.d.). However, this requires more equitable sharing of goods and services and scaling down natural resource consumption. Consuming closer to subsistence levels of water and food rather than at much higher levels, and in general, subordinating ultra-luxurious living to more modest ways, could permit the dual flourishing of humans and nature (Cumming, 2016; Dovers & Butler, 2015). Socio-ecological justice may call for the redefinition of a good life as one not centered around unnecessary wealth accumulation and the overconsumption of goods and services.

In this chapter, I have brought into contact existing theories of social and ecological justice to speak of a unified socio-ecological justice that conceives of justice as a concept applicable to the entire Earth community. Social justice has been defined as opportunities for all humans to realize their potential and ecological justice as sufficient healthy ecological space for nature to thrive. Further, I have suggested that the principal barriers to socio-ecological flourishing are humans dominating and oppressing other humans and nature. It is to those concerns that I turn next.

3. DOMINATION AND OPPRESSION AS INJUSTICES

The injustices of domination and oppression are long-standing features of the landscape of human history. Psychologists Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto write in their book *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*, “Despite tremendous effort and what appear to be our best efforts stretching over hundreds of years, discrimination, oppression, brutality, and tyranny remain all too common features of the human condition” (2001, p. 3). Other accounts trace the existence of domination and oppression, not through hundreds, but thousands of years. The oppressive system of patriarchy serves as an example (Ananthaswamy & Douglas, 2018). Patriarchy can be defined as “... a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (Walby, 1989, p. 214). The system affords men more power than women through positions of social, economic, and political importance (Ananthaswamy & Douglas, 2018). In the academic literature, much has been written about domination and oppression. A November 2021 keyword search in JSTOR—a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary sources—for the terms “domination” and “oppression” yielded 466,340 and 258,742 results, respectively. The related terms “exploitation,” “subordination,” “subjugation,” “marginalization,” “subversion,” and “othering” also returned hits with “othering” receiving the most with 736,888. This chapter focuses on the meanings of the related and overlapping concepts of “oppression” and “domination” as they relate to both humans and nature. I examine both terms for the thoroughness that they provide compared to looking at only one.

For general guidance of the discussion in this chapter, I will distinguish between the terms “domination” and “oppression” using dictionary definitions. Oxford

Dictionaries define oppression as “prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority, control, or power” and domination as “the exercise of control or influence over someone or something, or the state of being so controlled” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.a; OxfordLanguages, n.d.). Common between the two concepts is the idea of exercising power over someone or something. In the case of domination, the definition suggests that it is not always a bad thing, but my concern in this work is harmful relationships of domination. For oppression, there is a moral evaluation built into the definition that conveys its badness. This brief analysis suggests that, in common usage, the two terms carry similar meanings, and they concern injustice. After discussing the domination and oppression of humans and nature, in Section 3.3, I will talk about the agents of domination and oppression.

3.1 Domination and Oppression of Humans

In this section, I review literature that explains the concepts of domination and oppression as they apply to humans. I draw on the contributions of political scientist Frank Lovett to discuss domination and philosophers Ann Cudd, Sally Haslanger, and Iris Young to talk about oppression.

3.1.1 Domination

In the book *A General Theory of Domination and Justice*, Lovett develops a theory of domination. He set out to do so partly because he believed that, even though other thinkers have provided accounts of domination, no one had offered a comprehensive theory of it. Lovett identified two sustained analyses of domination in

contemporary literature: one in Chapter 6 of Thomas Wartenberg's book *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (1990) and another in Chapter 2 of Philip Pettit's book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997).⁵ In his own book, Lovett provides a descriptive account of domination along with a normative account that says what should be done about it. His account is nonideal in that he argues for the minimization of domination to the extent that it is possible rather than completely eliminate it (Lovett, 2010). Although the elimination of domination is ideal, Lovett's non-ideal approach of minimizing it would still markedly improve the quality of human lives compared to the status quo.

According to Lovett, domination "should be understood as a condition experienced by persons or groups to the extent that they are dependent on a social relationship in which some other person or group wields arbitrary power over them" (Lovett, 2010, p. 2). A paradigm case of domination is the institution of slavery. The slave-master relationships in ancient Rome, colonial Brazil, and antebellum slavery in the American South are instantiations of domination (Lovett, 2010).

Lovett discusses three conditions necessary for domination. The first is the dependency of the subject of domination on the agent of domination. The higher the dependency the worse the domination suffered. The degree of dependency hinges on the exit costs for the dependent. For example, in a society with an autocratic government, in general, it is not easy for most people to leave that society. Totalitarian and despotic states often try to raise the costs of emigration to strengthen their grip on domination. In

⁵ Wartenberg's Chapter 6 is entitled "Structures of Domination" and Pettit's Chapter 2 is entitled "Liberty as Non-domination" (Lovett, 2010).

such circumstances, the dependency of members of those societies on the dominators is very high (Lovett, 2010).

The dependency of the subject of domination, however, can be weakened with certain policies. For instance, at the workplace, an employee is less of a subject of domination if they have access to unemployment benefits which would make it easier for them to change jobs. This can lower the worker's dependency on employers. While domination requires a person or group to be dependent on another to some minimum degree, that condition alone is insufficient for a social relationship to be considered one of domination (Lovett, 2010).

The second necessary condition of domination is a power imbalance where one person or group has more power over another person or group with which they can change what the other may otherwise prefer to do. Continuing with the workplace as an example, to bring about higher levels of effort from workers, managers could issue various threats or inducements. They could also manipulate worker preferences by convincing workers of an idea, such as the ethical value of hard work, to increase their levels of effort. Regardless of the methods employed, managers exercising the full extent of their power over workers using the combination of available strategies translates to the greatest difference made in the overall levels of worker efforts. The power imbalance between managers and workers can be reduced by instituting policies that distribute power more equally between the two groups, such as ones that render union organization easier and employer collusion more difficult, lowering appreciable power imbalances between them (Lovett, 2010).

The third necessary condition of domination pertains to access to arbitrary power. If the exercise of power can be constrained by effective social conventions such as social norms and laws that are enforced, then it would not be arbitrary. Both social conventions and enforced laws, alone or in conjunction, can restrain power. Social conventions derive their robustness from individual psychology and social expectations. If waiting in line for service rather than walking up to the front of the line is a societal norm, internal and external sanctions persuade individuals to follow the norm. Internal sanction reduces the likelihood of a person cutting in line if doing so makes the person feel worse. External sanction performs the same role if others make the person feel worse for having violated a rule (Lovett, 2010). To the extent possible, agents of domination, such as despots, authoritarians, and totalitarians, attempt to free themselves from social constraints. Power can become arbitrary when gaps arise in the web of effective social conventions that govern it. Gaps may be unintended or accidental, but they could also be explicitly created and sheltered by social conventions. One such social convention is traditional family law, which aimed to protect the authority of husbands and parents from external interference. The convention created a zone where husbands and parents could exercise unchecked power over their wives and children (Lovett, 2010). Domination thus entails a social dependency of the subjects of domination on the agents of domination, a power imbalance between the two, and arbitrary power in the hands of the agents of domination.

To further understand domination, I will now describe two ways in which such relationships can be characterized. One is outcome-based, and the other is structure-based. Outcome-based domination focuses on the outcomes of social relationships while structure-based domination spotlights their structure. Lovett describes the structure of a

social relationship as “... the complete description of its members’ opportunity sets, as determined by their respective natural and social endowments and, more significantly, by the relevant features of the basic structure of the society in which that relationship is embedded” (2010, p. 42). Applying the structure-based conception to the slave-master dynamic shows that the slave is always subject to domination regardless of variables such as the temperament of the slave or the master. Whether the master is lenient or harsh is irrelevant. So is the degree to which the slave tolerates enslavement or regulates behavior to avoid harm. How each slave-master relationship plays out depends on the particular choices that masters and slaves make within their opportunity sets. Regardless of the outcomes, the structure-based conception of domination highlights the existence of the power asymmetry within these relationships. The outcome-based conception has a different focus. It directs attention to the outcomes of a relationship, which can be better or worse for the members in the relationship. In the slave-master dynamic, they would depend on the choices made by the masters and slaves from within their opportunity sets (Lovett, 2010).

For Lovett, the structure-based conception of domination best represents the nature of domination (Lovett, 2010). His view appeals to my intuitions as well because the structure-based conception captures the idea that relations of domination are enabled by the power asymmetry that lies within the structure of social relationships (Lovett, 2010). It makes sense to say that, without a structure that facilitates domination, there is no domination. But, as Lovett points out, social and political structures on their own are insufficient for domination. They need agents. Consider master-slave relationships which

are abandoned by the masters. In such a scenario, the institution of slavery is bound to collapse. As Lovett puts it,

Once their masters have fled, there is no longer anyone present to order them around, to whip and beat them, and (on the other side) no one for them to bow and scrape before and curry favor with. When there are no agents, there is no domination. (2010, p. 48)

While agents are a necessary component of relationships of domination, social and political structures can enable them to dominate. As such, it makes sense to say that dismantling structures that facilitate domination is a path forward to ending extreme power asymmetries that could result in domination.

Social justice can be thought of as minimizing domination or maximizing non-domination. As Lovett conceives it, “Societies are just to the extent that their basic structure is organized so as to minimize the expected sum total domination experienced by their members, counting the domination of each member equally” (2010, p. 159). This conception of social justice requires the creation of a basic structure of society—the set of social and political institutions and practices—which minimizes domination. The structure would be amenable to revisions so as to respond to changing empirical conditions. Three strategies to reduce domination that correspond with the three necessary conditions for domination discussed are reducing the dependency of persons or groups on others who have more power over them, lowering imbalances in social power, and decreasing the arbitrariness with which social power may be exercised (Lovett, 2010). Now that we have an understanding of domination, I will now turn to the concept of oppression.

3.1.2 Oppression

The term “oppression” refers to a type of injustice. To examine the concept, I rely on Ann Cudd, who took a careful look at it in the book *Analyzing Oppression*. Cudd argues that oppression is the fundamental injustice of social institutions perpetrated on social groups by other groups. Oppression became an important topic in political philosophy in the modern period with the advent of the idea that humans are, by and large, in some sense or other, moral equals. Political philosophers of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries developed liberal political theory and used the term oppression primarily to refer to political repression and domination. In the eighteenth century, oppression generally meant the illegitimate imposition of arbitrary or unjust laws on citizens, causing them material deprivation or physical brutality (Cudd, 2006).

In the nineteenth century, a few shifts occurred in the conception of oppression. One was the movement from the political conception of the oppressor as the ruler and the oppressed as the ruled to the social conception where the oppressor and the oppressed belonged to social groups. Credit for this change has been given to the thinkers John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, who wrote about the oppression of women by men and about the economic domination of the working class in the capitalist economic system, respectively. Another contribution came from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who conceived of oppression as psychological domination (Cudd, 2006).

In the twentieth century, the concept of oppression expanded to include a variety of groups (Cudd, 2006). In the 1949 book *The Second Sex*, French writer Simone de Beauvoir did a thoroughgoing analysis of the oppression of women by men looking at the economic, political, psychological, and sexual domination of women by men (Cudd,

2006; de Beauvoir, 2011). Beauvoir's contemporary, West Indian psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, analyzed colonial imperialism in his 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth* arguing that oppression always involves either direct or indirect violence. By the latter, he meant severe material deprivation through means such as controlling the economy and paying only subsistence wages (Cudd, 2006; Fanon, 2004). Since the 1970s, other cases of oppression have received more attention in the literature, namely the oppression of groups such as Blacks, Jews, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, children, the disabled, and the elderly. By the late twentieth century, oppression had begun to mean unjust violence along with economic, social, political, and psychological injustices suffered by a wide variety of social groups (Cudd, 2006).

In the twenty-first century, social theorists agreed that oppression has a structural aspect. As Cudd observes, "Amidst the competing theories, examples, and explanations of oppression, a consensus has been forged on the idea that oppression comes out of unjust social and political institutions" (Cudd, 2006, p. 20). These institutions are formal and informal social structures and constraints, such as laws, economic structures, social norms, and cultural practices. Injustices occur through unjust social and political institutions that fail to regard all people as moral equals, and oppression takes place when these institutions confer unfair power and advantage to some people while harming others (Cudd, 2006).

Cudd's analysis relied on Sally Haslanger's contributions. A few of them follow. Haslanger had contrasted agent oppression with structural oppression. The former is the most familiar notion of oppression and refers to agents misusing their power to harm others. Agent oppression focuses on wrongdoing by individuals or groups who

wrongfully or unjustly inflict harm upon others. This type can be minimized by reshaping the worldviews of individuals responsible for harm (Haslanger, 2004).

Structural oppression focuses on social and political wrongs facilitated by social and political arrangements built into government, economy, religion, family, etiquette, law, education, transportation, media, arts, culture, and language. In terms of government, a tyrannical structure would be unjust because it does not count everyone as moral equals. Tyranny would not be accepted by a community of reasonable equals due to the morally problematic distribution of power and resources. A case of governmental structural oppression is the disenfranchisement and broad disempowerment of women in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (Haslanger, 2004).

Cultural practices are also vehicles for oppression when they impose unfair burdens on particular groups or create disproportionate opportunities in favor of certain groups. Examples are gender norms concerning child care, elder care, and housework that oppress women while privileging men and creating or perpetuating illegitimate power relations between the sexes. The misallocation of power unjustly disadvantages members of the oppressed group. Structural oppression can be minimized by remaking societal structures responsible for harm, and carefully designed societal structures also prevent individuals from unwittingly causing harm (Haslanger, 2004).

Haslanger maintained that it is important to consider both agent and structural oppression because both immoral people with power and unjust societal structures with built-in power asymmetries can do harm. While agent oppression can compound structural oppression, not all who are privileged by oppressive structures are oppressive agents. Blameworthiness for agent oppression depends on the intentions of agents or their

negligence in determining the full impact of their actions. Blameworthiness for structural oppression depends on the role that individuals or groups play in causing or maintaining unjust structures. Accounting for both kinds of oppression allows us to see the constraints placed by structural oppression and the agency of individuals within those structures to remove those constraints (Haslanger, 2004). Oppression can occur through agents and structures, and various levels of blameworthiness can be meted out to different individuals and groups.

In developing her theory on oppression, Haslanger relied on ideas presented in Iris Young's book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Haslanger, 2004). Young understood that a crucial part of social justice entails the distribution of material goods, such as things, resources, income, and wealth, as well as the distribution of nonmaterial goods, such as rights, opportunities, power, and social positions. However, she maintained that "it is a mistake to reduce social justice to distribution" (Young, 1990, p. 15). In her view, the distribution focus obscures the social and political structures that often help determine the patterns of distribution. She argued that, in addition to the distribution locus, the injustices of domination and oppression⁶ should be factored into conceptualizing social justice as both highlight certain features of the social world, such as social practices, cultural norms, and social and political institutions, that bear on social justice. The various features either liberate or inhibit individuals from self-determination and self-development (Young, 1990).

Domination was characterized by Young as institutional constraints that inhibit people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. It

⁶ In Chapter 2 of the book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Young discusses oppression in the context of social justice, and in Chapter 3, she examines domination in the same context.

is domination when individuals have to perform actions whose rules and goals were set by authorities or experts without their input. As Young noted, “Increasingly the activities of everyday work and life come under rationalized bureaucratic control, subjecting people to the discipline of authorities and experts in many areas of life” (Young, 1990, p. 76). An example is a workplace that separates major decision-making power about operations from all workers and positions that are impacted. When only top administrators decide matters such as organizational goals, division of labor, pay scales, and relations of superiority and subordination, that amounts to institutional domination. All workers except those in the top positions are subject to varying degrees of domination in a descending chain of command or a hierarchy of authority (Young, 1990).

According to Young, culture is a vehicle for oppression. She identified racism as a form of oppression in the cultural milieu of the United States. The portrayal of specific groups of people in particular ways by the television and film industry serves as an example. Black people are often depicted as criminals, hookers, and maids while roles as figures of authority, glamour, or virtue are rare occurrences for them (Young, 1990). Narratives of this kind through the media capture a kind of injustice that takes place through social institutions (Cudd, 2006; Young, 1990). As Young observes, “The symbolic meanings that people attach to other kinds of people ... often significantly affect the social standing of persons and their opportunities” (Young, 1990, p. 23). Works of fiction seem to have real consequences for real people based on how they are characterized in them.

Returning now to Cudd’s analysis, who echoes Young and Haslanger, oppression appears to have a large structural component that systematically harms people. The

structures do not treat everyone as moral equals. Cudd points out these defects of social and political institutions when she writes, “The basic flaw in oppressive institutions is that they fail to treat individuals as moral equals; they harm some by allowing others systematic, unfair power and advantage” (Cudd, 2006, p. 20). Cudd also distinguishes between material and psychological oppression that can occur through societal institutions. Material oppression occurs through physical harm or through a reduction in material resources, such as wealth, income, access to health care, or rights to inhabit physical space. Psychological oppression occurs through psychic harm from objectification, humiliation and degradation, violence and the threat of violence, and false beliefs that support oppressive relations. According to Cudd, both psychological and material oppression cause and exacerbate the effects of the other, and societal structures are vehicles for oppression (Cudd, 2006).

The concept of oppression has evolved since its inception in the modern period when it referred to the narrower conception of arbitrary and unjust material harms inflicted on subjects ruled by a single ruler. The category of the oppressor has since expanded to include groups of people, such as women, Blacks, Jews, gays, and lesbians, and the concept of oppression now extends beyond the political sphere to include a broader range of harms that include social, psychological, and economical. Cudd, Haslanger, and Young posited that oppression occurs through formal and informal social structures and cultural institutions, such as law, convention, religion, economic structures, and social norms, mores, and practices. As with Haslanger, I also prefer to not reduce oppression to agents or structures as allowing space for both kinds of oppression heightens understanding of the ways in which life opportunities are constrained by the

people and institutions that populate society. The broader approach better equips us to counter oppression.

3.1.3 Domination and Oppression

I have covered the concepts of domination and oppression individually. Now I will look at them together. For Lovett, oppression is a much broader concept than domination. Although he does not compare the two in depth, he stated that, in Young's work, the term "oppression" "seems to operate merely as an umbrella term for diverse sorts of systematic social harms" (Lovett, 2010, p. 122). Lovett believes that the term applies whenever opportunities for persons or groups are "reduced or restricted in some significant respect, especially by systematic institutional forces" (Lovett, 2010, p. 122). And, according to him, when there is domination, there is almost always oppression as domination contains a feature of oppression in that it restricts opportunities (Lovett, 2010). Further, Lovett appears to suggest that, when there is oppression, there is not always domination. He writes, "[W]e might describe people as being oppressed by abject circumstances, or by a heavy tax burden, and so on" (Lovett, 2010, p. 122). Perhaps he is right. We can think of other circumstances one may find oppressive, for example, hot or cold weather.

Young uses both terms and makes a distinction between them. Oppression, for her, refers to institutional constraints on self-development, and domination, institutional constraints on self-determination. Reflecting on the conditions of groups that social movements in the United States since the 1960s regarded as oppressed—Blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, Jews, lesbians, gays, Arabs, Asians, old people, working-

class people, and the physically and mentally disabled—Young aimed to systematize the meaning of oppression as used by these diverse political movements. She writes:

In the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. In that abstract sense all oppressed people face a common condition. Beyond that, in any more specific sense, it is not possible to define a single set of criteria that describe the condition of oppression of the above groups.

Consequently, attempts by theorists and activists to discover a common description or the essential causes of the oppression of all these groups have frequently led to fruitless disputes about whose oppression is more fundamental or more grave. (Young, 1990, p. 40)

Young finds a common denominator in all forms of oppression. The hindrance to self-development to which she refers is the main concern of my work. Oppression inhibits human flourishing, a moral good that ought to be promoted.

As for domination, Young characterizes it as institutional conditions that inhibit people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Her answer to resist domination is participatory democracy whether in the affairs of the state or the workplace. As she puts it,

Persons live within structures of domination if other persons or groups can determine without reciprocation the conditions of their action, either directly or by virtue of the structural consequences of their actions. Thorough social and political democracy is the opposite of domination. (Young, 1990, p. 91)

Important here is the idea that, in circumstances of non-domination, individuals would have the decision-making power to self-rule and self-determine the shape of their daily affairs.

As can be gathered, the concepts of domination and oppression interpenetrate and overlap. They are so enmeshed and entangled that authors who focus on one term often use the other in their discussions. At times, the usage of the terms even seems synonymous. I do not seek to fully disentangle the two concepts, but both refer to the restriction of life opportunities of individuals, which hinders their flourishing. I find the analyses of Lovett, Cudd, Haslanger, and Young helpful in thinking about domination and oppression as they point to features of our social and political institutions that need to be corrected in order to form a just society. Three necessary conditions of domination, according to Lovett, are dependency, imbalances of social power, and the arbitrariness with which social power may be exercised. Lovett sees domination as something that occurs through structures and agents. Cudd and Young believe that oppression arises from unjust social and political institutions. Haslanger, similar to Lovett, maintains that it is important to consider both agent oppression and structural oppression because both immoral people with power and unjust societal structures can do harm. The four views taken together suggests that both individual agents and social structures can participate in domination and oppression. Now that we have a sketch of the domination and oppression of humans, I will look at the two concepts as they apply to the natural world.

3.2 Domination and Oppression of Nature

In this section, I examine the attitudes that promote the domination and oppression of nature, the features that characterize the two injustices, and the natural entities that can be subject to them. To describe domination, I present empirical evidence that suggests the human domination of the natural world and draw from the works of philosopher Eric Katz, author Eileen Crist, philosopher James Sterba, and author Anna Wienhues. For an account of oppression, I draw from an article by philosopher Lisa Kretz, the book *Animal Rights/Human Rights: Entanglements of Oppression and Liberation* by sociology professor David Nibert, a two-volume book, *Animal Oppression and Capitalism*, edited by David Nibert, and the perspective of anarchist political ecology.⁷

3.2.1 Domination

Humans did not always dominate nature the way they are said to now. Belief systems with multiple gods and earth spirits, such as paganism, that generally located the sacred throughout nature prevailed prior to the rise of Judeo-Christian values some 2,000 years ago. The forces of Judaism and Christianity laid the foundations for a system of beliefs that framed humans as separate from and superior to nature. The Old Testament sanctioned a relationship of exploitation with the decree that humans have dominion over

⁷ Anarchist political ecology is a broad interdisciplinary field that encompasses many areas of the social sciences, the physical sciences, and the humanities. Important related fields include social ontology, value theory, environmental ethics, social ethics, normative political theory, sociological theory, cultural history, landscape history, cultural anthropology, political anthropology, ecopsychology, mass psychology, political psychology, political geography, cultural geography, social geography, environmental studies, human ecology, community ecology, social ecology, and evolutionary biology. Running through these diverse but related areas is “a common critique of the dominant world system as unjust, oppressive, genocidal, and ecocide [*sic*], and a common commitment to the development of a personal and social practice capable of overcoming that system and establishing a liberated Earth community” (Clark, 2021, p. ix).

Earth. Later, in the seventeenth century, influential philosopher René Descartes associated humans with having a mind and nature with not having one and maintained the view that humans are separate from and superior to nature, which was inert matter to be mastered and exploited (Alberro, 2019).

To characterize the domination of nature, I will begin by looking at the coinage of the term “Anthropocene,” which refers to an unofficial unit of geologic time used to indicate a period in Earth’s history when human activity significantly impacted the planet’s climate and ecosystems (National Geographic Society, 2019). The 4.5-billion-year history of the earth has been divided into a hierarchy of eons, eras, periods, epochs, and ages according to major changes revealed in geological strata (Angus, 2020).

Scientists debate whether we are still in the geological epoch of the Holocene or whether we have entered the Anthropocene epoch. As conservation biologist Richard Steiner puts it, “Never before has a single species of organism so dominated and damaged the biosphere of our home planet” (Steiner, 2017, para. 1). The Anthropocene Working Group agreed in 2016 that the Anthropocene began in the year 1950 with the Great Acceleration that resulted in a dramatic increase in human activity affecting the planet (National Geographic Society, 2019). The notion that humans have fundamentally influenced natural processes has “become a standard and non-controversial datum of the environmentalist world-view” (Katz, 1995, p. 276).

A variety of physical evidence in the geological strata are candidates to substantiate the beginning of the Anthropocene. Examples include plastics, concrete, radioactive fallout, ash from fossil fuels, and traces of various long-lasting and readily identifiable chemical pollutants (Angus, 2020). Another candidate is the transformation

of chickens and their global presence. Geologists regard the arrival of the broiler chicken in the 1950s and its worldwide incorporation on industrial farms as an alteration of the biosphere (Bennett et al., 2018). In the article “The Broiler Chicken as a Signal of a Human Reconfigured Biosphere,” the authors write,

Modern broiler chickens are morphologically, genetically and isotopically distinct from domestic chickens prior to the mid-twentieth century. The global range of modern broilers and biomass dominance over all other bird species is a product of human intervention. As such, broiler chickens vividly symbolize the transformation of the biosphere to fit evolving human consumption patterns, and show clear potential to be a biostratigraphic marker species of the Anthropocene. (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 9)

Mounting evidence points to humans as a dominant species on earth. Although harms from human domination of nature are not always apparent, evidence suggests that humans are having a disproportionate negative impact on other species and ecosystems. If that is the case, we have a moral duty to alter our behavioral patterns to engender conditions of flourishing for nature.

To further understand the human domination of nature, I will now pivot to Eric Katz’s discussion of the environment using the themes of justice, domination, and imperialism in the book *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*. Katz sees nature as a moral subject with intrinsic value and regards human actions that modify or destroy natural processes as morally problematic because it denies natural nonhuman entities and systems opportunities for self-determination and self-realization. In his view, complex holistic natural systems and communities have internal design,

purpose, and control and, nonliving natural entities, even if they do not self-realize, are essential components of autonomous natural systems. All human activities that alter nature count as the human domination of nature. As he writes, “When humans shape and manipulate the natural world to meet their own interests, to satisfy their desires, it is a form of anthropocentric domination, the oppression and denial of the autonomy of nature” (Katz, 1997, xxiv). From Katz’s perspective, domination denies nature the freedom to pursue its own independent course of development (Katz, 1997).

Although Katz says domination includes all human activities that “shape and manipulate” nature, he does appear to deem as morally permissible certain uses of nature in the interest of human flourishing (Katz, 1997, xxiv). In his words,

Artifacts enable humanity to control the forces of nature for the betterment of human life. Generally, this artifactual control of natural forces is not a moral evil: the processes of agriculture, engineering, and medicine are necessary for the fullest possible development of human life—*human* self-realization. But the management, alteration, and redesign of nature results in the imposition of our anthropocentric purposes on areas and entities that exist outside human society. (Katz, 1997, p. 130)

Katz seems to consider all human interaction with nature that alters it as a form of domination because it interferes with its self-realization. At the same time, he appears to suggest that it is morally permissible for humans to pursue activities that relate to their flourishing. On this account, some forms of domination seem to be morally acceptable while others are not. Taken together, Katz appears to be conveying that humans have a

moral obligation to preserve the integrity and free development of the natural world insofar as that is possible (Katz, 1997). As he puts it,

[H]umanity has moral obligations to the natural world, similar to the obligations that exist from one human being to another, to preserve its integrity, identity, and free development. As moral agents, our primary moral goals are to preserve autonomy and to resist all forms of domination, both within the human community and within the natural world. (Katz, 1997, xxv)

But if resisting all forms of domination means that humans cannot shape and manipulate nature for their basic needs, then human life would not be possible.

Philosopher Ned Hettinger regards Katz's characterization of domination as extreme. Hettinger expresses concern about human uses of nature being portrayed as tending toward wrongdoing when he writes, "I fear that Katz's conceptualization of how humans have wronged nature may entail that *all* human activity toward nature wrongs nature" (Hettinger, 2002, p. 110). If that is what Katz means, then that would prevent humans from meeting their basic needs for it would be impossible to do so without some modification of nature. Hettinger also points out that humans are no different than nonhuman species in shaping the natural world to meet their interests (Hettinger, 2002). I find Hettinger's view more reasonable as it is not possible to survive, let alone flourish, if we cannot use nature to meet our basic needs. In my view, responsible human use of nature for survival and flourishing does not tend toward the domination, oppression, or subversion of nature's autonomy as Katz suggests (Katz, 1997). Responsible use entails considering the human impact on nature as we meet our basic needs and minimizing harm. For instance, we can ask whether activities such as road building, urban sprawl,

farming new lands, and so forth are “displacing other species or degrading their habitats” (Noss, Nash, Paquet, & Soulé, 2013, p. 242). If we perform these activities when they are avoidable and they harm nature, then we can be said to be dominating nature.

Unchecked human expansion that results in negative impacts, such as biodiversity loss, can be said to be a form of domination. In the book *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization*, Eileen Crist points to the magnitude of the human footprint on the planet. In the context of biodiversity loss, she writes:

Biodiversity is disappearing because of the wholesale takeover of previously vast, connected, and free landscapes and seascapes, and the virtually unrestrained invasion into the planet’s remaining wild nature. Wilderness, the matrix within which biodiversity thrives, is shrinking and becoming fragmented, resembling shards of natural areas in the midst of hostile developments such as industrial agriculture fields, grazing ranges, roads, highways, clear-cuts, mining projects, suburban sprawl, fences and other constructed barriers, and oil, coal, and gas ventures. (Crist, 2019, p. 12)

Crist’s claims are echoed in a 2019 article in the journal *Scientific Reports*, which declares, “Habitat loss and fragmentation due to human activities is the leading cause of the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services” (Jacobson, Riggio, Tait, & Baillie, 2019, p. 1). The lead author of a study published in 2021 on ecologically intact communities stated, “[O]nly 2 to 3 percent of the land surface of the world can be considered to look like it did 500 years ago in terms of both intact habitat as well as intact fauna” (Yarlagadda, 2021). Various sources report events such as habitat and biodiversity loss which have a negative impact on the biosphere. In my view, when these types of events

occur due to an avoidable expansion of human activities, it adds up to the human domination of nature.

For greater understanding of the contours of the domination of nature, it is helpful to look at interactions that are not regarded as dominating. To that end, it is beneficial to consult the works of James Sterba and Anna Wienhues, author of *Ecological Justice and the Extinction Crisis*. Sterba and Wienhues both recognize that conflicts of interests between humans and nonhuman nature are inevitable. Humans harming other beings appears to be a necessary condition to survive and thrive. This is similar to nonhuman beings harming humans to do the same like that of a salmonella bacterium in a human host (Wienhues, 2017; Wienhues, 2020). According to Sterba, we can justify a preference for basic human interests on the grounds of self-preservation as we grant moral consideration to all beings (Sterba, 2007). Sterba's "principle of human preservation" says,

Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of individual animals and plants, or even of whole species or ecosystems. (Sterba, 2007, p. 77)

On this view, humans can privilege satisfying their basic needs over the basic needs of nature. That can lead us to the question of what constitutes basic human needs. While Sterba has his own conception of what comprises basic human needs, discourse about this topic continues in multiple fields of inquiry.⁸ Notwithstanding, we can affirm that there is

⁸ Theoretical and empirical developments in multiple disciplines continue to refine the concept of basic human needs. Philosophy, sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology, and political science all have something valuable to say about the nature of basic human needs (Dover, 2016; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010).

such a thing as basic human needs and that they must be met for humans to live a good life. With regard to domination, what matters is how we meet those needs. Responsible ways of meeting basic human needs need not be considered as dominating nature. We can permit them for self-preservation.

Another principle called “a principle of disproportionality” put forth by Sterba can also help us to think about domination. The principle says, “Actions that meet nonbasic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual animals and plants or even of whole species or ecosystems” (Sterba, 2007, p. 78). This principle is already found in ethical relationships between human beings. It is similar to the prohibition of people attending to their nonbasic or luxury needs by aggressing on other people’s ability to meet their basic needs. In Sterba’s view, this principle is required “if there is to be any substance to the claim that the members of all species count morally” (Sterba, 2007, p. 78). As he explains:

We can no more consistently claim that the members of all species count morally and yet aggress against the basic needs of animals or plants whenever this serves our own nonbasic or luxury needs then [*sic*] we can consistently claim that all humans count morally and then aggress against the basic needs of other human beings whenever this serves our nonbasic or luxury needs. (Sterba, 2007, p. 78)

It is difficult to deny the force of Sterba’s argument. If we are to accept that all life forms have equal moral standing, then moral consistency requires that we respect the basic needs of all members of our moral community. Practicing this second principle may require making significant changes in our lives. Nothing less may suffice if all species count morally (Sterba, 2007). For Sterba, then, humans dominate nature when they meet

their nonbasic needs by frustrating the basic needs of nature. Now that we have seen multiple accounts of the term domination, I will turn to the related concept of oppression.

3.2.2 *Oppression*

The term “oppression” is commonly applied to nature through the lens of ecofeminism. I will rely on that literature as well as thought in sociology and anarchist political ecology to discuss the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism accommodates a diverse array of perspectives and escapes easy characterization. Although informed by different views on how Western dualism, capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism perpetuate ecological degradation and human oppression, it is bound together by a commitment to ending ecological degradation and human oppression (Carlassare, 2000). For a broad conception of ecofeminism, I will enlist the help of philosopher Trish Glazebrook. Glazebrook writes,

Ecofeminism is the theory and practice of examining and challenging the political, social, historical, epistemological, and conceptual links between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. It has evolved into a movement that connects all the “-isms” of domination, e.g., racism, sexism, and classism, with the exploitation, degradation, and destruction of natural entities, habitats, and ecosystems. (Glazebrook, 2014, p. 1765)

It is worth noting that authors using the ecofeminism perspective also use the associated term “domination” to describe relationships with women and nature. Elizabeth Carlassare, who has written about ecofeminism, is an example. Carlassare defines ecofeminism as “a social movement and form of theoretical inquiry that resists

formations of domination and seeks to construct a politics for planetary survival and social egalitarianism” (Carlassare, 2000, p. 89). Nonetheless, the idea remains that both humans and nature are concerns of ecofeminism.

I will now turn to Lisa Kretz’s article “The Oppression of Nonhuman Life: An Analysis Using the Lens of Karen Warren’s Work.” Kretz draws from thinkers such as Karen Warren, Peggy McIntosh, Marilyn Frye, Kenneth Goodpaster, and Paul Taylor to make the argument that nonhuman living entities can be subjects of oppression. Kretz admits all living things into the moral community on the basis that they can be either harmed or benefited. In her view, if it is not possible to harm something, then it is not possible to oppress that thing. As she puts it, “If it is impossible to harm or benefit something we cannot have positive or negative moral responsibilities toward it” (Kretz, 2018, p. 211). Kretz conceives of oppression as instances where individuals in a group are immorally harmed systematically due to their group membership and believes that moral agency is not required to be subjects of oppression (Kretz, 2018). Both ideas suggest that farm animals can be subjects of oppression, and, if we extend this line of reasoning, we can also include a forest of trees in the moral community as they can be harmed or benefited as well. So, moral subjects can suffer the harms of oppression even though they are incapable of oppressing, and, according to Kretz, we have a moral obligation to work toward the cessation of the human oppression of other life forms (Kretz, 2018).

To further comprehend oppression, it is helpful to consider what does not count as oppression. I agree with Kretz that morally considering other life forms does not imply that we remove ourselves from moral consideration. Expanding our moral consciousness

need not prohibit us from prioritizing our own morally appropriate needs for survival and flourishing. Respecting other life forms does not require disregarding our own welfare. For instance, accepting viruses as living things need not mean that we stop administering vaccinations against them because of the possibility that we are systematically oppressing them. As we take measures to protect ourselves from other life forms, we can still take seriously the suggestion that all other life forms can be subject to oppression. An example provided by Kretz of human oppression of nature is the factory farming of animals. She also suggests that mass extinctions of members of various species due to anthropogenic influences could be viewed as human oppression of nonhuman life (Kretz, 2018).

I will now shift to ideas in the books *Animal Rights/Human Rights: Entanglements of Oppression and Liberation* and *Animal Oppression and Capitalism*. They cover the oppression of animals for food, war, labor, entertainment, and experimentation (Nibert, 2002; Nibert, 2017). As for oppression for food, the advent of agriculture about ten thousand years ago saw a marked change in the relationship between humans and other animals. As human settlements shifted from transient to more permanent, animals such as sheep, goats, cows, and pigs were held and bred in captivity and their bodies were used for food. Labor power of such animals as elephants, oxen, yaks, horses, and donkeys was exploited to till soil, pull sledges and wagons, power millstones and pestles, and perform other tasks related to human economic production. The clearing of land that accompanied the growth of agricultural society was a detriment to the animals that used it as their homes. Habitats were burned or razed for grazing or in preparation for cultivation resulting in displacement, orphanage, and death (Nibert, 2002).

Motivated at least in part by economic gains, agriculture-based human societies devalued and oppressed animals (and humans) and etched their inferior positions into their social institutions. As Nibert notes,

The oppression of other animals, and the closely associated oppression of humans, was motivated by material interest—the creation and hoarding of privilege. Just as with other animals, over time the oppression of humans assigned to devalued social positions also came to be viewed as a natural and normal aspect of worldly existence. The vast majority of human animals on the Earth would be relegated to the socially created position of peasant, serf, or slave, and other animals generally would be relegated to positions of livestock, quarry, or pests. Their lowly positions and ill treatment were woven into the fabric of the economic, political, religious, and social systems and thus *institutionalized*.

(Nibert, 2002, pp. 26-27)

The oppression of animals (and humans) continued unabated. During the American expansion into the homelands of Native Americans, the buffalo, prairie dogs, and other animals considered pests were nearly exterminated. This opened the door to profit from the cultivation of large numbers of cows in the western plains. By the mid-1880s, an estimated 7.5 million cows lived in the Great Plains north of Texas and New Mexico, but the overgrazed and depleted rangeland could not sustain them. Dry and hot summers left millions of cows underfed, dehydrated, and in poor condition to face the winter and their natural tendency to move south in harsh winter weather was controlled by barbed wire (Nibert, 2002). These are some of the oppressive conditions that animals under human care have had to endure.

For another perspective on the human oppression of nonhuman life, I pivot now to thought in anarchist political ecology. Anarchism opposes government or hierarchies of power and domination between people. The theory assumes that people are capable of exercising their autonomy to make individual and collective decisions (Schmitz, 2021). Ecoanarchism reflects the ecofeminist ethics of care and “recognizes the importance of value at all significant levels: that of human persons, of other living beings, of human communities, and of larger ecological ones” (Clark, 2021, p. xiii). In the edited volume *Undoing Human Supremacy: Anarchist Political Ecology in the Face of Anthroparchy*, activist Friederike Schmitz looks at oppression from the perspective of anarchist political ecology. Animal liberation arguments from the anarchist perspective claim that, if oppression means cruel or unjust use of power, animals are being oppressed by humans. Whether it is cruel⁹ or unjust to use animals for the production of meat, milk, and eggs is a controversial topic, but, for Schmitz, animal domestication has already been established as an ethically unjustified practice based on the idea that it is unjustified discrimination against animals. So much follows from the argument from commonalities which says that humans and nonhuman animals do not differ in morally relevant capacities and that nonhuman animals deserve the same moral consideration as humans. From this viewpoint, the distinction made between the two groups is unjustified, because, if humans were the victims of the harms of domestication, then that would not be judged as morally acceptable. As such, the practice of animal domestication is wrong (Schmitz, 2021).

Scholars have also likened the oppression of animals to racial oppression in multiple ways. The practices of branding, force-feeding, forced breeding, the separation

⁹ One can even ask whether what is called “humane” treatment of animals on farms constitutes “cruel” (Schmitz, 2021, p. 33).

of families, and the use of violence to ensure compliance characterize both the treatment of slaves and the treatment of animals. The ideological tools employed to justify these practices are similar. They include objectification, de-individualization, and denying members of the oppressed group certain capacities like intelligence and autonomy. Even if life on farms is not torturous for animals, it may still be wrong to turn other beings into objects whose primary ends are to fulfill human wants. As sociology professor Bob Torres notes, the problem is, “[I]t reifies human dominance, and exploits another for your ends” (Torres, 2007, as cited in Schmitz, 2021, p. 37). In that case, to avoid oppression, it seems that humans would have to cease using animals for food. But, another way would be to produce food by doing the least possible harm to animals and the rest of the natural environment. Schmitz seems to suggest as much when she writes, “In my view, it is very hard to argue that a truly respectful and informed guardianship would still harm the animals” (Schmitz, 2021, p. 39). According to her, the unequal power structure between humans and animals makes those relationships ones of domination. However, the power asymmetry does not always translate to harm to animals if they are under the guardianship of well-intentioned humans who provide an acceptable standard of care. The power asymmetry and the standard of care can be compared to those found in human parent-child relationships where certain inequalities in decision-making power, an ineliminable part of those relationships, exist. If humans can respect and foster the interests and independence of animals, as with their children, so long as it is not detrimental to their well-being, perhaps domestication is morally acceptable. Respect for animals means honoring their capacities to make decisions for themselves and enhancing their freedom to the extent that it is possible. This means allowing them to decide on such

things as when and what to eat, what to do during the day, and which companions to spend time with. While there may be inequality in decision-making power, that alone does not necessarily lead to oppression and its harms. Sanctuaries and farms where animals are able to exercise their natural capacities despite restrictions on their freedoms can be places where they can have fulfilling lives (Schmitz, 2021).

3.2.3 Domination and Oppression

Various authors have discussed the domination and oppression of nature. The domination of nature can be measured by the physical expansion of the human species across the globe and the human impact on lands and seas worldwide, such as through anthropogenic climate change. As Sterba sees it, humans dominate nature when they meet their nonbasic needs at the expense of nature meeting its basic needs. For Katz, the alteration of the natural world is a form of human domination of nature because it interferes with its self-realization. While he regards the entire natural world as a moral subject, Kretz makes the case for the subset of nonhuman life as moral subjects.

Oppression, for her, is systematic harm to groups in the category of nonhuman life. In Nibert's historical account of animal oppression for food, labor, war, entertainment, and experimentation, he says that agriculture-based human societies devalued and oppressed animals for economic gain. Although Schmitz characterizes the domestication of animals as ethically unjustified due to discrimination against animals without valid justification, she seems open to the idea of respectful domestication of animals.

We have seen various accounts of the domination and oppression of humans and nature. Now, I will attempt to identify the agents of domination and oppression of both.

3.3 Agents of Domination and Oppression of Humans and Nature

All humans do not dominate and oppress other humans and nature to the same degree, that is, if they do so at all. The origins of social and ecological injustices are socially unequal. Some individuals, groups, and societies are more responsible for injustices and the resulting social and ecological ills than others (Grzybowski, 2019). If we are to enter states of non-domination, it is important to identify the agents of domination and oppression so that we can take actions to prevent their ability to exercise unchecked power over other humans and nature.

Agents of domination can be placed in two broad categories. One is the power elite described as such by social critic C. Wright Mills in 1956. Mills characterized the power elite as people in positions that enable them “to make decisions having major consequences” (Mills, 2000, p. 4). Mills says that these positions are found in the main institutions of society, specifically, the state, corporations, and the military. The power elite are those who occupy strategic command posts of the social structure that centralize national power. The influence of the big three also shape other social institutions, such as family, religion, and schools (Mills, 2000).

According to Mills, the elite is the “inner circle of ‘the upper social classes’” (Mills, 2000, p. 11). He says that they are self-conscious of their membership in the upper social classes and that a qualitative split separates members of the elite from nonmembers. People in the higher circles in and around the command posts are often thought of in terms of what they possess. They have a greater share of the most highly valued things and experiences, such as money, power, and prestige as well as the opportunities those goods open up in their lives. The elite acquire valued things and

experiences through their positions in major societal institutions, bases of power that are chief centers for exercising power and acquiring and retaining the things that they have. Important to note here is that the powerful are able to realize their will even if others resist (Mills, 2000).

Stephen Reyna, associate of the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology, expands on Mills' portrayal of the power elite. To Mills' capitalist, political, and military elites, Reyna adds educational elites, such as Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors, and senior professors, who regulate various institutions of schooling, as well as cultural elites, such as religious, museum, and media heads, who regulate cultural institutions. Reyna defines the elite as the "upper-class actors who occupy positions with considerable authority over considerable force resources" (Reyna, 2016, p. xiv). By force resources, he means instruments (e.g., tools, capital, technologies), land, actors, culture, and authority that cause effects when choreographed together (Reyna, 2016). These accounts of Mills and Reyna point to a group of individuals in society that have more power and influence than the great majority. Nibert notes that the powerful and the privileged are served by oppression. He provides a historical review of how economic gains underpin the development and institutionalization of oppressive practices. As he puts it, "[O]ppressive practices generally serve the interests of a powerful elite and, to a lesser degree, other privileged humans. The vast majority of humans and almost all other animals are ill served" (Nibert, 2002, p. 52).

Apart from individuals, countries and corporations can be considered agents of domination and oppression. They engage in domination when they use their unchecked power to exploit politically vulnerable people and their environments for profit and

power. In the United States, for instance, companies dump toxic waste or emit noxious fumes in low-income neighborhoods because it is easier to do so there than in high-income neighborhoods. They impose their wills on local residents who carry less weight in the eyes of politicians who permit these actions. Similarly, when wealthy countries farm out poisonous waste and polluting industries to impoverished countries, they are dominating other humans and nature in those countries (Krause, 2020).

Another agent of domination and oppression is the individual consumer.

Individuals contribute to the domination and oppression of other humans and nature, and even themselves, with certain choices in the marketplace (Freeman, 2020). We can regard the overconsumption of goods and services as acts of domination and oppression when they cause harm to the Earth community (Freeman, 2020). Across the globe, the production, use, and disposal of products for human use is responsible for environmental degradation. Overconsumption contributes to habitat destruction, species loss, soil and water depletion, and global climate change (Kaza, 2000). Consuming no more than what is necessary to meet basic needs and purchasing eco-friendly and fair-trade¹⁰ products are ways of living that support non-domination and non-oppression. Not everyone participating in the economy, however, is able to make these decisions because societal systems and structures do not permit them. People may not have the means to support eco-friendly and fair-trade products when they cost more, or they may be forced to drive a car because of a lack of public transportation in their locale (Freeman, 2020).

¹⁰ Fair trade is a global movement made up of a diverse network of people and organizations who put people and planet first, ensuring such things as safe working conditions, environmental protection, and sustainable livelihoods (Fair Trade USA, n.d.).

Domination and oppression occur in degrees with different agents exercising different amounts of power. The effects are felt in different proportions around the planet by humans across various social hierarchies and the natural world (Krause, 2020). More responsible consumers dominate and oppress to a lesser degree if they do so at all. Societies that facilitate conditions of non-domination and non-oppression through their social and political institutions can be regarded as dominating and oppressing to a lesser degree as well (Freeman, 2020). To combat domination and oppression, it is also helpful to understand their causes, a topic that I explore next.

4. CAUSES OF DOMINATION AND OPPRESSION

We depend on each other and nature to flourish. Interacting with other humans and nature is a major part of the human experience. Our relationships with each other and nature can be complex and complicated. Understanding the reasons humans dominate and oppress other humans and nature can aid us in addressing the injustices of domination and oppression using law, policy, and education.

Over the course of history, humans have marginalized other humans based on attributes such as race, sex, ability, class, age, and sexual orientation for one reason or another, consciously or unconsciously. The concepts of inferior Blackness and superior Whiteness and racism were invented to justify the oppressive practice of slavery, a conscious type of oppression that produced profits for slave-owners (David & Derthick, 2018; Kendi, 2016). Ableism—discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities—may have evolutionary and existential origins that are less accessible to awareness and may operate on an unconscious level (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Sanctioned by the view that nature is inferior, humans have also dominated and oppressed nature. The reasons for domination and oppression of humans and nature are important to understand because the remedies to combat those injustices must address their causes for them to be effective. In the next four sections, I examine some causes behind the domination and oppression of humans and nature.

4.1 Social Psychological Explanations

Several social psychological explanations aim to explain the existence of human oppression of other humans. An outline of six leading theories follows.

According to social identity theory, people favor their in-group and discriminate against out-groups to feel better about their in-group associations. This preference can become dangerous when social groups with power and privilege discriminate. For instance, when heterosexual business owners regard members of the LGBTQ+ community as morally corrupt and do not serve, hire, or interact with them in any way, they are oppressing that community (David & Derthick, 2018).

A framework called social dominance theory proposes that power and privilege imbalances along with social hierarchies between social groups are an inevitable part of competition in a world with limited resources. Groups that rise to the top, such as Whites, U.S. citizens, males, heterosexuals, and able-bodied persons are winners and deserve their top spot in the social hierarchy. Once atop, they maintain their power and privilege through oppressive means (David & Derthick, 2018).

Terror management theory posits that, to cope with the threat of mortality, people increase in-group favoritism and intensify their allegiance to value systems or political ideologies, such as liberalism or conservatism. Liberals become more liberal and conservatives become more conservative. Oppression occurs when social groups attempt to protect their worldviews from being supplanted by other worldviews held by other social groups as a way of transcending death (David & Derthick, 2018; Fiske & Russell, 2010; Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2016).

An attitude called right wing authoritarianism says that people try to manage the fears of living in a world they perceive as dangerous by preferring an orderly society that adheres to conventional values. Other worldviews and ways of living are regarded as

threats to traditional ways. People in power that hold right wing authoritarian views may oppress other social groups to protect their worldviews (David & Derthick, 2018).

System justification theory refers to the tendency of some people to preserve particular value systems even though they may not reflect their values. The theory says that people seek to implement, uphold, and strengthen value systems they regard as just and may oppress themselves or their in-groups, which would be a deviation from the previous four theories that argue that social group oppression is motivated by self- or in-group interests (David & Derthick, 2018). System justification theory explains why many people defend social systems that subject them to injustice and misery. For example, despite significant disparities in income, education, employment, and health, low-status minorities in New Zealand—Māori, Asians, and Pacific Islanders—legitimize hierarchical ethnic group relations at least as much as the European majority (Jost, 2020). As John Jost, author of *A Theory of System Justification*, writes, “[P]eople are motivated—not necessarily at a conscious level of awareness—to defend, bolster, and justify existing social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements because doing so serves fundamental psychological needs” (Jost, 2020, p. 6).

According to colonial theory, some groups of people exploit other lands and the people on those lands based on their perceived inherent superiority over other people. They believe that it is their destiny or right to exploit. Colonizing groups aim to pass on aspects of their worlds they believe to be superior, such as capitalism, Christian beliefs, and the Western culture. Colonizers may believe that their intentions are benevolent as they forcefully civilize, enlighten, or develop those perceived as uncivilized, unenlightened, or undeveloped. An example is the forceful takeover of lands from Native

Americans by the United States to exploit resources. Indigenous languages, worldviews, and ways of living were associated with inferiority and forcefully supplanted with elements of the colonizers' world that were purported as superior, such as the English language and the Christian religion (David & Derthick, 2018). Associated with colonialism is the concept of neocolonialism. The term was added to the lexicon of political thought during the 1950s in the Global South. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, neocolonialism was a major political phenomenon in the newly independent countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The concept points to the various positive and negative impacts that European powers have on former colonies in the non-European world through back-door access to the economic, political, sociocultural, and military spheres of countries in the Global South (Uzoigwe, 2019).

These social psychological theories suggest that the domination of other humans may have multiple causes. The theories submit that group oppression takes place when oppressors sense threats to their values and self-esteem as well as when they feel that access to resources for leading safe, productive, and fulfilling lives is in jeopardy (David & Derthick, 2018). We can conclude that a basic underlying reason for oppression seems to be the advantages that it confers to oppressors.

4.2 View of Nature as Inferior and Merely a Resource

All humans use natural resources to meet their basic needs for water, food, clothing, and shelter. But, the manner in which they interact with nature depends on the way they regard nature. Considering ourselves a part of nature or separate and in some way superior to it can influence how we behave toward it. The former view may move a

person to steward nature while the latter may legitimize exploitation. The conception of nature as subordinate to humans—which has become popular in the last few centuries—originated in Europe. The antecedents of European thought trace back to the philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome as well as the ideas with Jewish origins inherited by the Christian Church. Both classical thought and Christian traditions held that human beings were placed in a position by God, or the gods, to subordinate nature (Ponting, 2007).¹¹

The anthropocentrism of classical thought and Christianity continued during the development of secular thinking in Europe in the sixteenth century. Referring to the time period of this development, Clive Ponting, author of the book *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations*, writes, “Humans were still regarded as placed in a special position by God, above other creatures and able to use them and the natural world for their own benefit” (Ponting, 2007, p. 121). Through the collective efforts of stalwart thinkers of modernity, especially through the thought of French philosopher René Descartes, the human-nature dynamic was altered to the detriment of both humans and nature (Kureethadam, 2017).

English philosopher Francis Bacon said, “The world was made for man ..., and not man for the world” (Bacon, 1895, p. xix). For Bacon, the purpose of science was to reclaim the dominion over the natural world that was lost with the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Ponting, 2007). Influential English philosopher John Locke asserted that humans were fundamentally different from the rest of nature due to their

¹¹ Indigenous belief systems and Eastern religious traditions, which regard nature with reverence and not as external objects to be dominated, controlled, and exploited have coexisted with Western thought since the times of ancient Greece and Rome. However, they were not as influential as European thought in shaping worldviews of the past few centuries (Alberro, 2019; Ponting, 2007; United Nations Environment Programme, 2017).

rationality and that nature unaltered by humanity was worthless (Gillespie, 2014). Locke saw nature as inferior and for human use. He wrote, “[T]here cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy another, as if we were made for one another’s uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours” (Locke, 1824, p. 133).

Locke’s attitude of human supremacy was also reflected in the thought of German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant reasoned,

As the single being upon earth that possesses understanding, and, consequently, a capacity for setting before himself ends of his deliberate choice, he is certainly titular lord of nature, and, supposing we regard nature as a teleological system, he is born to be its ultimate end. (Kant, 2008, p. 259)

For Kant, nature is a means to human ends. Similar to Kant, seeing it as a resource, German philosopher Karl Marx wrote:

Nature becomes ... simply an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility; it ceases to be recognized as a power in its own right; and the theoretical knowledge of its independent laws appears only as a strategem designed to subdue it to human requirements, whether as the object of consumption or as the means of production (Marx, 1980, p. 99).

Marx saw nature as an object for the instrumental use of humans and not as something with value on its own terms.¹² Reflecting the thoughts of his predecessors, German philosopher Johann Fichte wrote:

¹² It is worth noting that other writings and interpretations of Marx suggest an interconnection and unity of humans and nature (Bennett & Chorley, 1978).

[S]hall my powers ... invade the external world. I will be the Lord of Nature, and she shall be my servant. I will influence her according to the measure of my capacity, but she will have no influence on me. (Fichte, 1910, pp. 28-29)

Fichte viewed humans as masters of the natural world, but failed to recognize that nature shapes humans as well. American economist Henry Carey observed in 1848, “The earth is a great machine, given to man to be fashioned to his purpose” (Carey, 1848, p. 95). Carey also saw nature for its instrumental use to humans.

The anthropocentric view frequently appeared in Western thought until the nineteenth century when developments in scientific theory, notably Charles Darwin’s ideas on the origins of species, natural selection, and adaptation, undermined it (Ponting, 2007). Anthropocentric environmental thought regards nature as inferior to humans and beneficial due to its instrumental value to humans. The anthropocentric doctrine has been reinforced over thousands of years of scholarship. By the beginning of the twentieth century, implicitly or explicitly, it became accepted by most of the world’s dominant cultures, serving as a foundation for exploiting nature (Gillespie, 2014).

Another term for anthropocentrism is human supremacy (Crist, 2017). Crist defines human supremacy as “... the pervasive belief that the human life-form is superior to all others and entitled to use them and their habitats” (Crist, 2019, p. 45). The effects of human supremacy as a lived worldview can be seen in the misuse and overuse of natural resources around the world. An extreme anthropocentric orientation contributes to the human domination and oppression of nature. If we had more respect for nature, it is conceivable that we would still be in the geological age of the Holocene and not the Anthropocene, when nature is viewed as a resource pool to serve a wide variety of human

endeavors. From the anthropocentric perspective, the utility-based relation to nature does not seem problematic as nature is assumed to exist for the sake of humanity (Ruuska et al., 2020). This kind of human supremacist standpoint has been blamed for problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and the sixth mass extinction event (Crist, 2019, Ruuska et al., 2020). To move us into a relationship of non-domination and non-oppression, it seems necessary to shed our human supremacist thinking. If humans are indeed not separate from and superior to nature, the notion of human supremacy¹³ needs to be revisited to expose the defects and consequences of that sort of thinking (“Anthropocentrism,” 2021).

4.3 A Logic of Domination

The domination and oppression of humans and nature can be explained by how we value them. In a 1990 article entitled “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism,” philosopher Karen Warren proposed a conceptual framework for understanding the oppression of women and nature. As she conceives it, “An *oppressive conceptual framework* is one that explains, justifies, and maintains relationships of domination and subordination” (Warren, 1990, p. 127). Patriarchy, for instance, is an oppressive conceptual framework that explains, justifies, and maintains the subordination of women by men. Warren identifies three features significant to oppressive conceptual frameworks. The first is the presence of value dualisms that form disjunctive pairs where the disjuncts are viewed as oppositional and exclusive elements rather than as complementary and inclusive. Mind-body, reason-emotion, and male-female are

¹³ Human supremacy is also referred to as human exceptionalism or anthropocentrism (“Anthropocentrism,” 2021).

examples of disjunctive pairs. The second feature is hierarchical thinking that grants higher value, status, or prestige to one of the disjuncts. The third feature is a logic of domination or a structure of argumentation that justifies subordination. This feature is the most significant aspect of the oppressive conceptual framework because it contains an ethical premise which permits the subordination of one disjunct. Dualism and hierarchy are not inherently problematic. The problem appears when they are used to establish inferiority of a disjunct to justify its subordination. An example is the oppression of women by men based on the notion that reason is present in men and absent in women (Warren, 1990).

Warren illustrates the logic of domination in an argument that aims to subordinate plants and rocks to humans. The argument reads as follows:

(A1) Humans do, and plants and rocks do not, have the capacity to consciously and radically change the community in which they live.

(A2) Whatever has the capacity to consciously and radically change the community in which it lives is morally superior to whatever lacks this capacity.

(A3) Thus, humans are morally superior to plants and rocks.

(A4) For any X and Y, if X is morally superior to Y, then X is morally justified in subordinating Y.

(A5) Thus, humans are morally justified in subordinating plants and rocks.

(Warren, 1990, p. 129)

Premise (A1) outlines a dualism, (A2) indicates a moral hierarchy between the two, and (A4) expresses a logic of domination. According to (A4), the superiority of one disjunct

justifies its subordination of the other. The logic of domination can be used to dominate and oppress both humans and nature.

Part of Warren's oppressive framework is highlighted in a recent work by psychologist Melanie Joy in the book *Powerarchy: Understanding the Psychology of Oppression for Social Transformation*. Drawing from relational-cultural theory,¹⁴ Joy sought to uncover the common denominator among all forms of oppression and proposed that an overarching belief system that she calls "powerarchy" informs all oppressive systems. According to her, "Powerarchy is a nonrelational system¹⁵ that is organized around the belief in a hierarchy of moral worth—that some individuals or groups are more worthy of moral consideration than others—and that is structured to maintain unjust power imbalances" (Joy, 2019, p. 6). Joy's characterization captures the value-hierarchical thinking present in Warren's (A2) and a logic of domination in (A4). On Joy's account, a key factor that gives rise to and helps maintain oppression is dysfunctional ways of relating to others. Oppression is a psychological phenomenon in the sense that oppressive institutions and structures, such as norms and traditions, reflect an oppressive mentality. The relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed can be characterized by a relational dysfunction (Joy, 2019). As Joy writes, "Oppression [is] ... a pathology in how individuals and social groups relate—to others, the world, and themselves" (Joy, 2019, p. 16).

¹⁴ Relational-cultural theory aims to understand the nature and quality of social relations by accounting for social and cultural influences on human psychology (McCauley, 2013).

¹⁵ Joy defines the opposite, a relational system, as a system organized around the belief that all humans are of equal moral worth, one that is structured to prevent unjust power imbalances (Joy, 2019).

Putting together the ideas of both Warren and Joy, a fundamental cause of domination and oppression appears to be the assigning of differential values to other humans and nature and using that hierarchical value system to justify dominating and oppressing other humans and nature regarded as inferior. This type of thinking is not new. It traces back at least to thinkers of ancient Greece, such as Plato and Aristotle, who believed in a natural hierarchy of ability in humans that justified institutions such as slavery and practices such as the denial of citizenship, fairness, and equal rights (Cudd, 2006).

4.4 Hypermateralism, Greed, and Hyperconsumerism

Throughout history and across the globe, philosophers, politicians, playwrights, novelists, economists, and religious figures have denounced placing a major life focus on money and possessions on the premise that a materialistic outlook undercuts more important pursuits that make life worth living, such as deep spirituality and satisfying relationships (Kasser, 2016). Speaking of the culture produced by American capitalism decades after the American Civil War, historian William Leach writes in the book *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, “The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society” (Leach, 1993, p. 3). The notion of human beings as consumers took root in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. The idea became commonplace in the country in the 1920s with the period after World War II seeing an eruption in consumption across the industrialized world (Higgs,

2021). In 1955, marketing consultant Victor Lebow noted that consumption was a mode of being. In Lebow's words:

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. (Lebow, 1955, p. 7)

The accounts of Lebow and Leach tell a tale of how consumption was a way of constructing identities and finding meaning in life.

Hypermateralism, greed, and hyperconsumerism are related concepts that appear to be causes of the domination and oppression of humans and nature. The Oxford dictionary defines materialism as "the tendency to treat material possessions and physical comfort as more important or desirable than spiritual values or a way of life based on material interests" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.b). Other definitions of materialism exist as well. For marketing professor Russell Belk, materialism

reflects the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in life either directly (as ends) or indirectly (as means to ends). (Belk, 1984, p. 291)

Hypermateralism points to the highest rungs of materialism and decreases the likelihood of deriving satisfaction from other sources such as social relationships and intellectual pursuits.

Another cause of oppression and domination seems to be greed, the desire to have more than is needed (Mahon, 2009). Other definitions of greed are an “excessive appetite for wealth,” “an inordinate desire, an insatiable longing for the possession of something,” and “an absorbing passion for earthly possessions and a selfish gratification in their retention” (as cited in Belk, 1983, p. 514). Belk notes that these definitions characterize greed as “a socially unacceptable degree of concentration on acquiring and possessing things and as being selfishly individualistic” (Belk, 1983, p. 514). To sum up, greed is an excessive desire for unnecessary wealth.

Consumerism points to the idea that consumption is the way to self-development, self-realization, and self-fulfillment (Benton, 1987). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with consumption, hyperconsumption, and sometimes even lower levels of consumption, is problematic when linked to the domination and oppression of humans and nature. As the provision of goods and services relies on human labor and natural resources, consumers ought to take into consideration the impact their consumption has on both humans and nature. When consumption props up domination and oppression, there needs to occur an evaluation of how to better meet our needs for flourishing.

To be sure, meeting our basic needs for water, food, clothing, and shelter requires the use and consumption of natural resources. However, hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism travel far beyond using and consuming nature’s resources to meet vital needs (Donner, 2014). They evince a value system that may need reconfiguration if

socio-ecological justice is a goal. The extraction, production, distribution, use, and disposal of materials all can have human and ecological costs. For instance, the assembly of computer chips by women who earn poverty wages in Malaysia and toxic oil polluting the lands of Ecuador are examples of oppression and domination that seem to have roots in hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism (Kaza, 2000).

While consumers have a role in hyperconsumption, the greed of the producers of goods and services is also responsible for it. The desire to maximize profit can motivate producers to exploit both laborers and consumers while ravaging plants, animals, waterways, and soils (Kaza, 2000). Businesses create new needs and desires in the minds of the consumer class through the reaches of different media, such as print, radio, television, and the internet. As a result, we continuously replace old needs and products with new ones and consumption extends beyond meeting everyone's basic needs (Higgs, 2021). Children are a target of marketers because of the profits they represent in the moment and in the future if preferences can be molded at a young age (Strasburger, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2004). A 2006 publication stated that the average young person views more than 3,000 advertisements per day on television, on the internet, on billboards, and in magazines (Strasburger, 2006). Marketers and advertisers, arguably driven by corporate greed, foster the values of materialism and consumerism to a high degree in the minds of people from a young age. The pursuit of material ends insensitive to the flourishing of other members of the Earth community can result in domination and oppression.

Nibert believes that the roots of oppression lie mainly in the pursuit of material interests. He writes, "[T]he motivation for the development and institutionalization of oppressive practices is primarily material, not attitudinal. Such arrangements are not

genetic or innate, and prejudice is the product of these arrangements—not the principal cause” (Nibert, 2002, p. 52). That prejudice is the product of economic arrangements was also suggested by Ibram Kendi, author of the book *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. In Kendi’s view, “[S]elf-interest leads to racist policies, which lead to racist ideas leading to all the ignorance and hate” (2016, p. 506). On Kendi’s account, Black people from Africa were classified as inferior to justify the slave trade, which was motivated by the desire for money (Kendi, 2016). As he explains,

By the mid-1400s, Slavic communities had built forts against slave raiders, causing the supply of Slavs in Western Europe’s slave market to plunge at around the same time that the supply of Africans was increasing. As a result, Western Europeans began to see the natural Slav(e) not as White, but Black. (2016, p. 24)

Both Nibert and Kendi suggest that prejudice is manufactured to serve the economic and political interests of dominators and oppressors. A 2021 publication in the journal *Labor History* on the economics of antebellum slavery in Southern United States also supports the idea that material gains are at least one source of motivation for domination and oppression. Klas Rönnbäck, the article’s author, writes,

The findings suggest that the cost of obtaining slave labor was much lower than the cost of obtaining non-slave laborers in this case, and that the difference was large enough to have had important consequences for the production involved, primarily of cotton. (Rönnbäck, 2021, p. 721)

Rönnbäck’s conclusion aligns with Nibert’s and Kendi’s views that there is an economic motive for domination and oppression.

An important problem associated with hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumption is that it harms people and the planet. As law professor James Speth observed in the introduction to a series of articles discussing systemic problems in the American economic and political system that undermine human and planetary well-being, the American system of political economy rewards the pursuit of profit, growth, and power, doing little to encourage a concern for people and the planet (Soper, 2017). Showing concern for the Earth community may mean challenging the hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumption that feature in our lives. This would make sense on a shared planet with finite resources. As philosopher Kathleen Moore sees it,

[H]uman flourishing depends on embracing a new ethic of self-restraint to replace a destructive ethos of excess. Greed is not a virtue; rather, the endless and pointless accumulation of wealth is a social pathology and a terrible mistake, with destructive social, spiritual, and ecological consequences. Limitless economic growth as a measure of human well-being is inconsistent with the continuity of life on Earth. It should be replaced by an economics of regeneration. Simple lifestyles that include thriftiness, beauty, community, and sharing are pathways to happiness. Celebrated virtues are generosity and resourcefulness. (Moore, 2016, p. 113)

As Moore suggests, minimizing domination and oppression may mean shifting from hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumption to other metrics of human well-being, such as spirituality, generosity, and thriftiness.

It may be that the domination and oppression of humans and nature cannot be explained by a single factor, such as social psychology, evolutionary programming,

individual worldviews and attitudes, or the political structure of a society. They all seem to be sources. The main concern in this thesis, however, is the attitudes of humans toward other humans and nature and the orientations of hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism that contribute to domination and oppression. In Chapter 6, I will discuss political, social, and educational pathways to minimize domination and oppression and engender socio-ecological flourishing. But now, I will say more about the harms of domination and oppression.

5. HARMS OF DOMINATION AND OPPRESSION

The first three chapters of this thesis have given accounts of the harms of domination and oppression. In this short chapter, I will dedicate a bit more space to discuss the harms that are suffered by both the dominators/oppressors and the dominated/oppressed. The abusive exercise of power over other humans and nature for the sake of one's own ends interferes with the self-realization of humans and nature and the greater good of the Earth community (Fraistat, 2016). This interference to socio-ecological flourishing constitutes harm to both humans and nature because it prevents the achievement of something considered morally good.

Domination and oppression hamper people's ability to imagine what worthwhile lives look like and carry out their life plans. The harm in not being able to flourish because of domination and oppression seems to be self-evident in that the lives affected are presumably worse off. Not being able to flourish is a harm because it diminishes the worth of people's existences and robs them of a greater quality of life. As philosopher Lisa Tessman notes, "Oppression clearly harms its victims ... because ... [it] entails the denial of the external conditions for a good life ..." (Tessman, 2002, p. 6). The non-flourishing of individuals also harms society because society misses out on the contributions of individuals who did not have opportunities to develop themselves. As the individual and the society are inseparable, it follows that there is also a coupling of individual and societal flourishing (Annett, 2016). A society that endeavors to help all its members flourish would presumably have more citizens who enrich that society. A prospering society would have more physicians, professors, athletes, entertainers, and entrepreneurs, all of whom make society better in their own ways. If communities across

the globe created the conditions for flourishing, more individuals are bound to flourish, which in turn makes those communities prosper. Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, and Isaac Newton are three examples of scientists who contributed to society (Barna et al., 2017). They were able to do so because they had opportunities to develop themselves. Einstein's theory of relativity revolutionized our understanding of space, time, gravity, and the universe. He contributed to the development of items familiar to many of us such as solar cells and paper towels, sketching out the basic principle of solar cell operation and helping lay the scientific foundation for paper towels (Waldrop, 2017). These contributions were possible because he had opportunities. We can say that both Einstein and society would have been harmed if the injustices of domination and oppression did not enable him to develop his talents and benefit society.

Domination and oppression also harm nature by interfering with its ability to realize its potential. The natural world not being able to express itself because of human domination and oppression speaks of a seemingly self-evident harm as it unjustly violates the will of nature to carry out its plans. Human agents of domination and oppression overexploit natural resources and do avoidable harm to nature. Excessive human activities in the form of manufacturing, transportation, fishing, agriculture, and waste disposal contribute to avertable adverse impacts on land, air, and water. A problem such as habitat loss results in the harms of species declines and extinctions (Stephen, 2018). Deteriorated air and water quality harm animals because they live their entire lives outside, breathing the air and drinking the water that humans pollute. Extra fine particles in the air, especially those less than 2.5 microns in diameter, can burrow into the deepest branches of birds' lungs and harm them (Huling, 2020; Stephen, 2018). As a team of

researchers point out in the journal *Science*, “[O]ur natural environment continues to decline under the weight of our consumption” (Díaz et al., 2019a, p. 1). The domination and oppression of nature, driven by hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism, which prompt people to overconsume goods and services, result in a variety of harms to the different life forms that populate our planet.

It is not only the dominated and the oppressed that are harmed from domination and oppression. The ill effects of these injustices are also felt by the dominators and the oppressors themselves. If we conceive of the flourishing of any one individual as interdependent on the flourishing of others, then harming others also harms the one doing harm. If a husband dominates and oppresses his wife, he is harming himself by decreasing the contributions that she can make to that relationship, undercutting his own flourishing. Philosopher Lisa Tessman captures this idea in the context of a collective. Tessman writes, “[A]ny one person’s flourishing is thought to depend on the flourishing of others and on the harmony and unity of those within a social collectivity such as a *polis*” (Tessman, 2002, p. 7). It seems fair to say that any one person’s flourishing is bound up in the flourishing of others. If this is true, then dominators and oppressors are harming themselves by undermining their own flourishing through reprehensible behaviors. Tessman’s thought on social interconnectedness also reflects a remark about justice expressed by civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote,

... I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. ...

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. (King, Jr., 2018, p. 75)

Like Tessman, King also refers to the interconnectedness of the individuals in a society. Both thinkers suggest that it is difficult to benefit from domination and oppression and fully flourish at the same time.

The domination and oppression of nature is also problematic for the dominators and the oppressors for a reason in plain sight. The perpetrators themselves are bound to be adversely impacted because they live on the same planet that they are destroying. As Tammana Begum, news writer for the United Kingdom's Natural History Museum, notes, "If we lose large portions of the natural world, human quality of life will be severely reduced ..." (Begum, n.d., para. 2). Dominators and oppressors have to remain on the same planet that they are exploiting and must face at least some of the detrimental consequences of their actions. It may be that they are not able to enjoy the natural beauty of the planet because it no longer exists, such as the coral reefs, which have bleached at an unprecedented rate, or they may experience extreme weather events, such as floods, tropical storms, extreme heat, and wildfires, linked to a warming world (Begum, n.d.; Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, n.d.).

Domination and oppression harm both the perpetrators and the victims. The two injustices impede socio-ecological flourishing. Given that humans have some control over their behaviors, as moral agents, they have some responsibility to not dominate and oppress other humans and nature due to the harms they cause. A central harm of the twin injustices of domination and oppression is thwarting the ability of humans and nature to develop and express themselves (Chen, 2017). The transgressions of the dominators and the oppressors also harm their own development. Now that we have further explored the

harms of domination and oppression, I will turn to the topic of socio-ecological flourishing and explore pathways to achieve it.

6. SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL FLOURISHING AND PATHWAYS TO IT

I have characterized socio-ecological justice as opportunities for all humans to flourish and healthy ecological space for nature to flourish. The injustices of domination and oppression are hindrances to socio-ecological flourishing. Non-domination and non-oppression are intrinsic goods necessary for flourishing but not sufficient in themselves. They further require the two currencies of socio-ecological justice: opportunities for all humans to flourish and healthy ecological space for nature to flourish. These currencies of justice foster worthwhile existences for all members of the Earth community. Socio-ecological flourishing entails all humans and nature reaching their highest potential and is a matter of both practical and moral concern. That it has practical implications is self-evident. It is in our best interest that the rest of the human population and nature is thriving as we benefit from that. We rely on each other to achieve our aims and the planet is our home. We are part of a network of relationships with the rest of the world. That the flourishing of all humans and nature is a moral issue has been a recurring theme throughout this work. One basic reason is that we share space and resources with other members of the Earth community. Fairness in sharing space and resources is a central feature of justice and flourishing, and how our actions impact others in our community is a basic concern of morality.

In this chapter, I describe socio-ecological flourishing and apply the capabilities approach framework, introduced in Chapter 2, to flourishing. A basic premise of this framework is that it is a tragedy for humans and nature to never have opportunities to realize their potential when doing so is viable. If we regard socio-ecological flourishing

as an intrinsic good, then we have a moral duty to not impede it¹⁶ and further to foster it. If we accept this duty, we ought to formulate social and political frameworks that promote the flourishing of the entire Earth community. Laws, policies, and norms should support that end (Nussbaum, 2006). I suggest in this chapter political, social, and educational pathways to create the circumstances and attitudes ripe for flourishing. The three pathways that I offer are not a comprehensive account to generate the conditions for flourishing, but they can have profound effects in preventing or minimizing the injustices of the domination and oppression of humans and nature and promoting their good.

6.1 Socio-ecological Flourishing

In the first two subsections of this section, I discuss what human and ecological flourishing look like and then put the two ideas in contact with each other in the third subsection on socio-ecological flourishing.

6.1.1 Human Flourishing

The concept of flourishing was introduced by Aristotle more than two millennia ago. There are many accounts of the idea at present. Lovett characterizes it roughly “as success in achieving autonomously formulated, reasonable life plans, through fellowship or community with others, over a complete life” (Lovett, 2010, p. 131). Law professor Gregory Alexander says, “[A] person’s life flourishes when it goes as well as possible, that is, when the person lives a life of dignity, self-respect, and satisfaction of basic material needs” (Alexander, 2018, p. 5). An even broader definition captures a

¹⁶ Two cases where morality permits frustrating the flourishing of another member of the Earth community, mentioned in Chapter 2, are self-defense and basic needs satisfaction in responsible ways.

flourishing life as one where a person's life is good or worthwhile. This broad notion can include other narrower concepts such as a life of virtue, pleasure, or welfare (Alexander, 2018; Pogge, 1999). An attractive comprehensive measure of flourishing comes from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University's Institute for Quantitative Social Science, which aims to study and promote human flourishing. The measure accounts for a broad range of states and outcomes in six central domains: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability (Harvard University, n.d.; VanderWeele, 2017). Tyler VanderWeele, director of Harvard's Human Flourishing Program defines flourishing as "living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good" (Kim & Lu, 202). VanderWeele's definition of all aspects needing to be good is a high bar for flourishing, but I find this broad conception appealing because it allows for a comprehensive assessment of a human life. At any rate, it is important to note that the satisfaction of basic material needs is a necessary condition for human flourishing.

A narrow formulation of flourishing, such as pleasure or morality, could be misleading because that may not be all there is to a flourishing life (Pogge, 1999). For example, if one merely helps others or only respects the constraints of morality, as noble as that sounds, that may not be a good life. One reason is that a perfectly moral life could be a difficult life for the person living it if it means a succession of suffering and no other worthwhile accomplishments in other areas (Arneson, 1999). Philosopher Susan Wolf, who defined a moral saint as "a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person ... who is as morally worthy as can be," argued that the life of such a being is "unattractive" from the "*point of view of individual perfection*" (Wolf, 1982, pp. 419,

437). Others, such as philosopher Vanessa Carbonell, disagree. Carbonell responded to Wolf contending that “the best life from the moral point of view (the life of the moral saint) is not necessarily unattractive from the point of view of personal perfection” (Carbonell, 2009, p. 372). English religious thinker John Wesley seems to have thought similarly. For Wesley, flourishing appears to revolve around a moral center based on his prescription, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can” (Wesley, 1915, p. 423). Some may consider Wesley’s moral precept very demanding, but it could also be a rewarding life.

Diverse intrinsic goods can help people flourish. I follow Alexander in saying that human flourishing can be morally pluralistic. More than one intrinsic good can constitute human flourishing. Knowledge, beauty, integrity, love, friendship, pleasure, happiness, welfare, freedom, and justice are all intrinsic goods that can contribute to enduring life satisfaction and make a life go well (Alexander, 2018). This is not to say that maximizing one intrinsic good may not lead to a flourishing life. However, the presence of one or more of these intrinsic goods in a person’s life arguably makes that life go better to a greater extent compared to not having at least one (Arneson, 1999). One complication worth noting is that goods for flourishing could come into conflict with each other. Two sets of examples are mercy and justice and privacy and security. It may be that justice requires less mercy and that security requires less privacy and vice versa (Alexander, 2018; Robbins, 2020). In such cases, the individual or community would have to decide which one better supports flourishing.

I use the concept of human flourishing as a blanket term which covers multiple irreducible values. For example, physicist Albert Einstein's genius and Roman Catholic nun Mother Theresa's compassion may not be reducible to a single foundational value. But both qualities are worth having. In this sense, human flourishing is value plural, and, in a value plural society, there are many ways to excel in life. This raises an important caveat. Not every way of living, no matter how excellent an individual is at their chosen path, maximizes flourishing. For instance, a life devoted to murdering Jews as a Nazi SS officer, no matter how excellently performed and personally fulfilling, is not a well-lived life (Alexander, 2018).

I particularly favor a conception of human flourishing put forth by professor of philosophy of education, Quentin Wheeler-Bell, because it highlights the idea of developing human potential. Wheeler-Bell characterizes a flourishing life as one that consists of the ability to reasonably narrate one's life in relationship to 'the good life.' Such a life requires having the capabilities to develop properly and fully, which includes growing, maturing, and making full use of one's potential, capabilities, and faculties. (Wheeler-Bell, 2014, p. 8)

Wheeler-Bell underlines the need for circumstances that foster self-development. The development of individuals may look different from one person to another, but what matters is that people have chances to realize their potential, provided that they are not harming others and nature in the process (Nussbaum, 2006).

If we begin with the present state of affairs in terms of opportunities to flourish, they look different for people in different countries and within countries. If we take access to wealth to be a reliable proxy for gauging a person's opportunities to flourish,

the global inequality of opportunity to flourish seems to be a matter of having good or bad luck based on one's place of birth. It turns out that a person's birthplace is the strongest determinant of their health, wealth, and level of education (Roser, 2019). In 2020, Macau was the richest country in the world with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita per year of \$117,340. Qatar was second with \$88,070, and the United States was tenth with \$66,060 (Suneson, 2021). Burundi was the poorest country in the world with a GNI per capita of \$270. Somalia was second with \$310, and Niger was ninth with \$540 (World Population Review, n.d.b). A wide gulf separates rich and poor countries. Also, within countries, there are gaps between the rich and the poor. Considering the current income inequalities, opportunities to flourish differ drastically in rich and poor nations as well as in rich and poor communities within countries. Beyond meeting basic material needs, to thrive, people ought to have opportunities to excel in various kinds of activities. Based on personal preferences and available opportunities, individuals can excel in such areas as music, sports, education, politics, and parenthood, some of which require more income than others.

I will illustrate what flourishing can look like in different countries, even with income inequalities, through the domain of sports. If one wishes to develop their athletic capacities, the choices vary based on their birthplace. Being born in Niger and the United States presents different opportunities for athletic development. In poorer countries, investment in sports is less of a priority in the national budget as well as in the educational system compared to richer nations. If there are opportunities for athletic development, there are fewer prospects for athletes to continue their training or pursue professional sports careers. Much athletic talent goes unrealized due to limited

opportunities (sportanddev.org, n.d.). If we measure athletic success based on Olympic medals, Niger has not done well. The country has a total of two Olympic medals in the history of the games, one bronze in boxing in 1972 and a silver in taekwondo in 2016 (“Niger at the Olympics,” 2022). About taekwondo, Issaka Ide, the president of the Niger Olympic Committee, remarks, “For a poor country like Niger, this sport is the best. Although the sport is from Korea, we have made it ours because it is very easy to practice without much equipment” (Beech, 2021, para. 6). In Niger, athletic development is constrained by the financial costs associated with sports.

In comparison to Niger, the United States, a rich country, collected 94 medals in the Summer Olympics of 1972 and 121 in 2016 (“United States at the Summer Olympics,” 2022). There are multiple reasons why. One is the wealth of the country. Wealthier countries generally win more medals than poorer countries at the Olympics (Kiersz, 2016). Higher-income countries seem to dependably produce superior athletes in Olympic competition. In some sports, a significant association can be seen between Gross Domestic Product per capita and medals. It is particularly visible in cycling, judo, rowing, swimming, and sailing. Success does not necessarily indicate that people in richer countries are naturally better at these sports than people in poorer countries. However, the former is more likely to have the equipment and the infrastructure necessary to develop particular talents as such items as gyms, pools, and sailboats are expensive. The facilities required to produce the world’s greatest athletes in dozens of sports is a costly undertaking that is more likely to happen in richer countries (Thompson, 2012). For Nigeriens to flourish, however, it is not necessary that they medal in cycling, judo, rowing, swimming, or sailing at the Olympics. And, as citizens of a country in the

tropics, nor is it necessary that they have opportunities to excel in outdoor sports held at the Winter Olympics. In fact, it is not even necessary that they make an Olympic appearance or even train in an Olympic sport. They could excel in sorro wrestling (a traditional sport of Niger), a non-Olympic sport, or flourish in another domain such as music or academics (Nevins, Seffal, & Spilling, 2020).

Having a few opportunities to excel in sports can help the overall project of human flourishing. If we consider the six central domains from Harvard's Human Flourishing Program that serve as a measure of flourishing (happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability), sports deliver on at least some of them. About the benefits of youth sports, the United States President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition Science Board writes, "Research shows that participating in youth sports can lead to immediate and long-term benefits for youth, their families, and communities" (President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition Science Board, 2020). Sports are associated with mental, emotional, and physical health benefits along with improving other desirable goods such as resilience, empathy, social skills, work ethic, and leadership qualities. Partaking in sports enhances critical thinking abilities and academic achievement (Flanagan, 2017; PCSFN Science Board, 2020). Compared to those who do not play sports, students on high-school teams perform better in school and are more apt to aim for higher education. Sports participation is also correlated with happier families and an overall higher quality of life (Flanagan, 2017). About high school sports, assistant high school principal Steve Amaro says, "Participating in high school athletics has long-lasting, definitive benefits, especially when athletic leaders create an

environment that challenges athletes and rewards the growth mindset. When participants are supported in this way, they develop lifelong habits that transcend high school” (Amaro, 2020). There is much to be gained from having access to athletic development. Nigeriens should have some opportunities to realize their potential through sports. Boxing and taekwondo are two sports in which they have medaled. But an athlete may not wish to take up boxing because of the dangers of concussion and brain damage associated with boxing (Leclerc & Herrera, 1999). If we are serious about creating opportunities for everyone to flourish, at least a few sports options for Nigeriens seem right so as to satisfy individual preferences and abilities. Otherwise, they should have opportunities in other areas, such as music or academics.

Adding to the disparity in opportunities between countries is the existence of the same problem within countries. The Gini Index, a measure of income inequality, serves as an indicator of opportunities for flourishing (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Recent data show that South Africa, with a Gini coefficient of 63, is the country with the greatest inequality and Slovenia has the least with a coefficient of 25. For Niger, it is 34, and, for the United States, it is 41 (World Population Review, n.d.a). In all four countries, we can assume that people’s access to developing their potential varies depending on the income bracket they find themselves in. This means that, even in wealthy countries, such as the United States, there may be a lack of opportunities for self-development for a segment of the population. According to the 2019 State of Play report by the Aspen Institute, children from lower-income homes face increasing participation barriers in sports. In 2018, only 22 percent of children ages 6 to 12 in households with incomes under \$25,000 played sports on a regular basis compared to 43 percent in homes with

\$100,000 or more (Solomon, 2019). These statistics coincide with the idea that if children must rely solely on their families' income, some may be priced out of certain sports. A 2019 survey that tracked the average annual costs per child associated with 21 sports found that the least expensive sports were track and field (\$191), flag football (\$268), skateboarding (\$380), cross country (\$421), and basketball (\$427). The most expensive were ice hockey (\$2,583), skiing/snowboarding (\$2,249), field hockey (\$2,125), gymnastics (\$1,580), and lacrosse (\$1,289) (Aspen Institute, 2019). The higher costs of some of these sports may foreclose opportunities for children to try them. However, this barrier is not necessarily a detriment to their flourishing as it does not have to hinge on all options being available to a child. If a few of the five affordable options are attractive to the child, the possibility to flourish remains. If not, a child in the United States may still be able to excel in other domains.

There are many ways all humans, both children and adults, can flourish in any society if they have opportunities. In a just world, even in an unequal one, everyone would have some opportunities to develop themselves in some domain, be it sports, academics, or music. All children in both Niger and the United States would have opportunities even though there may be more in the United States. I will discuss in Section 6.2 political and social pathways that can create more opportunities in the poorest countries and for the poorest people in wealthy countries. Before that, I will turn my attention to the concepts of ecological and socio-ecological flourishing.

6.1.2 Ecological Flourishing

The perspective of ecocentrism, introduced in Chapter 2, sees inherent value in all of nature, granting moral consideration to both the biotic and abiotic components of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Informed by an ethic of flourishing, ecocentrism says that one should act in ways that contribute toward the flourishing of both individual organisms and the ecosystems in which they are embedded (Percival, 2018). It is important to note that the ecocentric view is not anti-human although some have suggested it (Washington et al., 2017).

The concept of ecological flourishing can be applied to individual elements of nature, such as a tree or a hen, or larger units, such as an ecosystem, both of which can be impacted by human actions, either promoting or hindering flourishing. An oak tree can be thought to flourish if it can achieve its highest potential based on the norm for that species. Even if we cannot be sure about what it is for an oak tree to flourish, we can try to imagine what that might be like. Martha Nussbaum suggested using our “sympathetic imagination to cross the species barrier” to understand nonhuman beings that are sentient even if the endeavor comes with the risk of fallibility (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 355). If we extend our imagination from nonhuman sentient beings to non-sentient beings, such as oak trees, we can conjecture that health may be a critical indicator of flourishing (Harman, 1983). In that case, flourishing for an oak tree entails enjoying good health and pursuing a variety of activities or goals characteristic of oaks such as producing acorns during its fruit-producing years. Outward indicators of health are a crown that has healthy foliage, less than 25 percent dead branches, and little or no epicormic sprouting (Gottschalk & MacFarlane, 1993). When an oak tree is not doing the aforementioned, we

can reasonably assert that it is not flourishing (Fulfer, 2013). The conditions for flourishing for an oak are such goods as healthy soil, clean water, and sunlight (Fulfer, 2013; Harman, 1983). Hindrances are unhealthy soil, polluted water, and insufficient sunlight, all of which can harm the health of an oak (Fulfer, 2013).

Having considered an example of non-sentient flourishing, I will now focus on sentient beings, in particular, farm animals. As many farm animals worldwide are not living an idyllic life, it seems safe to say that the majority are not flourishing. In 2017, around 99 percent of farmed land animals and fish in the United States lived on factory farms (Anthis, 2019; Zampa, 2019). A 2019 approximation found that, worldwide, over 90 percent of farmed animals lived on factory farms. This includes an estimated 74 percent of farmed land animals and virtually all farmed fish, which is roughly 31 billion land animals and 39 to 216 billion fish (Anthis & Anthis, 2019). Even though we do not know what it is like to be a hen or another farm animal, through our imperfect human lens, we can meaningfully hypothesize what enables their flourishing based on the species norm for behaviors and activities (Fulfer, 2013). For hens, it seems reasonable to say that they flourish when they can engage in behaviors typical for them, such as running, pecking, scratching, resting, flapping wings, grooming plumage, and sleeping undisturbed. These are goods for hens, and all of this may be restricted at a factory farm due to a lack of opportunities (Bergmann et al., 2017; Fulfer, 2013). If they are suffering, we can assume that they are not flourishing (Fulfer, 2013). Applying the capabilities approach framework to an oak or another organism, sentient or non-sentient, flourishing can entail experiencing the rich plurality of all life activities and reaching species-specific goals (Nussbaum, 2006).

It is worth acknowledging that, when an individual life is taken prematurely, such as that of an oak in a forest or a hen living a good life on a farm, to serve basic human needs, it can be said that their full flourishing was abbreviated. However, from the perspective of morality, we can argue that those early deaths were justified if less harmful routes for human flourishing were not possible. If harms could be avoided as humans live their best lives, for example, by causing fewer deaths to hens or other animals by consuming less meat, then we can argue for the avoidance of those unjustified harms. A basic test to see if actions that support human flourishing are unethical is to see if other actions that cause less harm are possible. If they are, morality demands that we take those alternate routes to flourishing.

In addition to individual organisms, the concept of flourishing can also be applied to ecosystems which can be impacted positively or negatively by human actions. An ecosystem can be thought of as a natural system composed of abiotic and biotic entities that interact and depend on each other's existence (Fulfer, 2013). The flourishing of the parts of the system, for example, an individual plant or an animal, and the flourishing of the whole can be considered interdependent. The Earth has a vast network of diverse ecosystems, such as streams, deserts, tide pools, and polar ice shelves, which are habitats for a variety of plants, animals, and microorganisms. Human action can foster or hinder the flourishing of these various ecosystems (Dotson, 2018).

Tea Kortetmäki, author of the article "Applying the Capabilities Approach to Ecosystems: Resilience as Ecosystem Capability," defines ecosystem flourishing as a condition in which the ecosystem can perform and maintain the functions characteristic of it, and exhibit and sustain its quality and diversity ["... and thus

its capacity to support people and the rest of life” (Prescott-Allen, 2001, p. 59)]. A flourishing ecosystem supports life processes that exist within or are connected with that system. (Kortetmäki, 2017, p. 46)

Kortetmäki offered the definition after acknowledging the difficulty of forming a universal definition for ecosystem flourishing as it would need to account for a great deal of context-sensitive information about ecosystems, complex entities about which we are still learning. For example, ecological knowledge is necessary to understand that a primeval forest with an abundance of decaying material or a bare mire in its natural state could be flourishing ecosystems as they may seem unattractive or not flourishing to the human eye (Kortetmäki, 2017). Nonetheless, according to Kortetmäki, a central feature of ecosystem flourishing is resilience, the ability to withstand stresses, anthropogenic or non-anthropogenic, and maintain key functionings necessary for ecosystem flourishing (Kortetmäki, 2017). If we take that account to be true, biodiversity is integral to ecosystem flourishing as it helps ecosystems absorb disturbances to the system. For example, if several species in an ecosystem have similar ecological functions that reinforce and support one another, that increases the likelihood for it to continue functioning in the face of internal or external disturbances compared to the absence of redundancy in functionings secured through biodiversity. Resilience enables ecosystems to keep their identities through disturbances. For example, it would help mires and primeval forests when disruptions threaten their identity (Kortetmäki, 2017).

Whether it is a moral wrong if anthropogenic disturbances cause the transformation of one flourishing ecosystem into another is a topic worth exploring. We can imagine a scenario where human actions destroy the conditions necessary for a

primeval forest to survive, turning that area into a young coppice forest. The new ecosystem can flourish as a coppice forest but not anymore as the kind of ecosystem it was earlier (Kortetmäki, 2017). Although I will not be entering into a deep discussion about the moral dimensions of anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic ecosystem transformations, they are worthy of contemplation.

Humans can foster or hinder ecological flourishing. Taking a stream ecosystem as an example, anthropogenic pollution could harm fish, mollusks, and other life forms that reside there, frustrating the stream's flourishing. Pollutants from the stream could leak into the soil and disrupt surrounding plant life. The effects on a smaller system radiate out, harming the larger ecosystem that contains it (Fulfer, 2013). As for larger ecosystems, a practice that damages them is factory farming. According to a 2020 report by Food & Water Watch, the United States has 25,000 factory farms with a total of 1.6 billion animals. Together they produce an estimated 885 billion pounds of manure each year, polluting the air, soil, and water and releasing climate-warming emissions (Food & Water Watch, 2020). Apart from factory farming, humans hinder ecosystem flourishing in other ways such as overfishing, which disrupts food webs in the ocean, and clear-cutting timber, which leads to soil erosion and habitat destruction (Dotson, 2018). On the contrary, humans can contribute to ecosystem flourishing by doing such things as meeting fish quotas, replanting forests, not polluting waterways, and not factory farming. These practices can help balance the Earth's ecosystems (Dotson, 2018). So can the reduction of the consumption of animal products in cases of high consumption.¹⁷ And, when we do raise animals, we can let an ethic of responsibility guide that practice. There

¹⁷ This move would also promote human flourishing as a diet that relies mostly on plants favors human health (Tello, 2018).

are other ways to help nature flourish as well. A basic goal is to do the least harm as we meet our essential needs.

Granted that humans share the planet with other species, it seems fair to say that they should also have sufficient ecological space to thrive. This means setting aside land free from development such as shopping malls and human settlements as well as not disturbing aquatic ecosystems from activities such as overfishing. Wilson proposed setting aside half of the planet's surface for nature "to save the immensity of life-forms that compose it" (Wilson, 2016, p. 3). He reasoned that large plots harbor many more ecosystems and the species composing them at a sustainable level. The larger the reserve in area, the more the diversity of life within those reserves. When reduced in area, diversity declines, and, many times, species are lost forever. By reserving half the planet's surface for nature, according to Wilson, a full representation of the Earth's ecosystems and more than 80 percent of the species can be stabilized (Wilson, 2016). About the half-earth proposal, Wilson said,

Large parts of nature are still intact — the Amazon region, the Congo Basin, New Guinea. There are also patches of the industrialized world where nature could be restored and strung together to create corridors for wildlife. In the oceans, we need to stop fishing in the open sea and let life there recover. If we halted those fisheries, marine life would increase rapidly. (Dreifus, 2016, para. 7)

Setting aside healthy ecological space for nature helps it retain its richness in variety. If biodiversity is a measure of flourishing and flourishing is a moral good, then we ought to set aside healthy ecological space to avoid the harm of reducing biodiversity on this planet.

Scaling up conservation and scaling down human systems that degrade the environment to promote the co-flourishing of humans and nature was the topic of a 2021 paper authored by 16 ecologists. Presently, about 15 percent of the Earth's land surface and 5 percent of the oceans are protected with designations that range from strict protection to sustainable use. The authors discuss protecting half the earth to create the conditions for achieving justice and well-being for both humans and other species. The paper calls for conserving half the planet's terrestrial, freshwater, and marine areas, representing all ecosystems. Two specific goals of the half-earth project are to limit biodiversity loss and to avert the worst effects of climate disruption. The project has a self-described ethical dimension as well. In the authors' words, "Nature Needs Half also offers an ethical framework that institutes justice toward the non-human world, by providing enough space for that world to recover and even thrive" (Crist et al., 2021, p. 2). The reach of distributive justice extends beyond humans into the nonhuman sphere, demanding that humans leave sufficient healthy ecological space for nature's flourishing. Governments have taken note. The European Parliament has passed a resolution to protect 50 percent of the ecosystems in the European Union by 2050 (Crist et al., 2021). Protecting nature and decreasing human activities that degrade nature benefit both the human and nonhuman communities by freeing up geographical space and livelihood sources for all species. For the paper's authors, downsizing also means a gradual and ethical reduction of the human population. As we share the planet with other entities of the natural world, they also have a claim on healthy geographical space (Crist et al., 2021).

The flourishing of nature, however, need not evict humans from their homes in the name of conservation. After all, humans are part of nature, and there is nowhere else to go other than nature. It is everywhere we turn. What we can do is minimize harm to maximize flourishing. For conservation projects on lands with Indigenous peoples, we should partner with them to spare them unnecessary hardship, especially because they inhabit a third of the land and are among the strongest defenders of Earth rights (Crist et al., 2021). Indigenous peoples and local communities can be empowered in the implementation of the Nature Needs Half proposal by placing decision-making power in the hands of those within the reserves. For many groups, such as the Dehcho Dene in northern Canada, protecting half of nature is part of their traditional ecological knowledge. The Dehcho Dene has in fact already articulated a 50 percent protection goal for their territory (Dinerstein et al., 2017). Conservation should respect the claims of the local people to the land they inhabit and include them in those conversations.

Also, conservation need not keep humans from recreating in the natural world. The principle of minimizing harm to nature to maximize its flourishing can be applied here as well. We can responsibly engage in a wide variety of activities, such as hiking, camping, and viewing wildlife, by reducing the associated negative impacts to the environment. For example, campers can decrease environmental damage by using fallen deadwood for campfires rather than cutting down trees (United States Geological Survey, 2018). Humans are part of nature, and nature can flourish if we relate to it on a basis of respect and cause the least amount of damage as we foster our own flourishing. It is this enterprise of co-flourishing that I discuss next.

6.1.3 Socio-ecological Flourishing

A socio-ecological ethic embraces the entire Earth community and all ecosystems. It promotes the flourishing of both humans and nature. As moral beings who are in a complex of relationships with other humans and nature, the proper ethical course seems to be to promote the flourishing of other humans and nature to some degree to create a stronger ecological community (Cuomo, 1998). At the practical level, because human flourishing is bound to the flourishing of the rest of the natural world, it behooves us to not hinder the flourishing of nature to the point where it negatively impacts our own flourishing. Toward fostering the good of nonhuman entities, philosopher Chris Cuomo writes,

Anything that possesses characteristic activities or qualities has the theoretical capacity to exist with health and integrity (at least as much as every human has the capacity to be virtuous). Promoting the good of a nonhuman entity amounts to promoting what is good for it, given its typical and special life cycles, modes of interaction, biological and ecological functions – ‘everything without which the life would be incomplete and lacking in value.’ (Cuomo, 1998, p. 64)

Cuomo suggests that flourishing could look different for different life forms and points out moral features of nonhuman entities to which we can pay attention, such as health and integrity. As creatures who are considerate of their own species and sensitive to the well-being of other life forms, the ethical viewpoint calls us to morally consider the entire Earth community.

The ethics of socio-ecological flourishing is concerned about the gross inequalities in human and ecological flourishing worldwide and about the mutual

flourishing of humans and nature. Both concerns can be illustrated using oil production at the Niger Delta as an example. This case shows how the overconsumption, and sometimes even the normal consumption, of goods and services can contribute to large-scale harms to other humans and ecosystems. For some people, driving an automobile is integral to their well-being. Operating a vehicle is essential for their flourishing because they need it to get to work, go for groceries, receive medical care, visit loved ones, and reach places of recreation. However, many automobiles require fossil fuels, which come from around the globe. The Niger Delta, which constitutes nine Nigerian states with over 37 million inhabitants, is one such place, supplying the United States and other countries with oil (Adekola, Fischbacher-Smith, Fischbacher-Smith, & Adekola, 2017; Hartman, 2018). The oil may help automobile owners, but oil production harms millions of coastal and Indigenous people as well as the fourth largest mangrove forest in the world and other ecosystems in the region (Hartman, 2018; Minority Rights Group International, 2018; Omorogbe, 2021).

Many local people, whose livelihoods are coupled with the mangroves, have suffered due to mangrove loss or deterioration from over 60 years of unmitigated degradation from oil exploration (Omorogbe, 2021). Large areas of the Niger Delta have been contaminated by gas spills, leaks, and flares and are unusable for farming (Minority Rights Group International, 2018). About 6,800 spills totaling 3,000,000 barrels of oil were estimated to have occurred between 1976 and 2001. Spills can be detrimental to the health of both humans and nature. Gas spills, leaks, and flares contaminate surface water, ground water, air, and crops with hydrocarbons that can accumulate in aquatic organisms and food crops on which the locals depend (Adekola et al., 2017). The impact on human

health includes asthma, cancer, premature death, and high infant mortality (Hartman, 2018). The natural world is affected as well. While speaking of dead fishes at Jones Creek, Chief Alfred Bubar lamented, “They are of no use to man or to nature. They have been forced to drink crude oil and they are dead” (Awajiusuk, 2015, p. 42). The activities surrounding oil production deny fish healthy ecological space to inhabit and the locals a source of food and livelihood (Awajiusuk, 2015). Both are injustices that impede the flourishing of humans and nature.

The greatest pollution of water bodies in the Niger Delta comes from the oil-extraction activities of the multinational oil companies operating in the region (Awajiusuk, 2015). When corporations can avoid harm, they have a responsibility to prioritize that over profits. Otherwise, it is a moral wrong. As Moore puts it, “[W]hen a corporation, to further increase profits that are already unimaginably immense—when a corporation, as part of its business plan, knowingly destroys the conditions of flourishing life on Earth . . . , [t]hat is moral monstrosity on a cosmic scale” (Moore, 2016, p. 9). Greed can destroy the conditions of flourishing and may be a factor in the case of the socio-ecological languishing in the Niger Delta.

Moore would also be right if she were to say that perhaps we do not need to extract as much oil to have decent living standards, and therefore it is wrong to do so. If decent living with less energy is not achievable now, perhaps it would be by the year 2050. The authors of the paper “Providing Decent Living with Minimum Energy: A Global Scenario” suggest that extending decent living standards¹⁸ to a global population

¹⁸ A decent living standard would include access to schools, hospitals, highly-efficient facilities for cooking, storing food, and washing clothes, nine pounds of new clothing per year, low-energy lighting, 50 L of clean water per day per person, 15 L heated to comfortable bathing temperature, climate control of around 68 °F, a computer with access to global information and communications technology networks, and

of about 10 billion is possible by 2050 with a final energy consumption reduced to the levels of the 1960s despite a population triple the size. However, this would require a massive rollout of advanced technologies and a reduction in energy consumption to levels of a generous sufficiency model (Millward-Hopkins, Steinberger, Rao, & Oswald, 2020). If the harms to humans and nature at the Niger Delta can be avoided, then it is morally wrong to continue oil production there. Beyond the local ecosystems and populations, fossil fuel burning from automobiles contributes to climate change which negatively impacts other people and ecosystems worldwide (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2016; United States Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.).

Oil production in the Niger Delta has varying impacts on the flourishing of humans and nature across the globe. The local human and nonhuman inhabitants pay a price for the flourishing of other humans if we can still characterize it as such. One wonders if true human flourishing can occur at the expense of the flourishing of other humans and nature. According to philosopher Laura Hartman, who was channeling Moore, “[W]hen (some) humans’ flourishing comes at the expense of others, be they impoverished humans or threatened nonhumans, it should not truly be considered as flourishing” (Hartman, 2018, p. 2). Hartman’s desire to reduce gross disparities in human and ecological flourishing seems to have moral traction. It would be wise to recognize the interconnectedness of all members of the Earth community and its bearing on socio-ecological flourishing. As Moore sees it, “Given that life on Earth is interconnected, we are called to affirm that all flourishing is mutual and that damage to the part entails damage to the whole” (Moore, 2016, p. 112). Unacceptable disparities in flourishing urge

extensive transport networks providing 9,321 miles of mobility per person each year (Millward-Hopkins, Steinberger, Rao, & Oswald, 2020).

us to imagine an ethic that fosters the thriving of the entire Earth community and its ecosystems.

We are persons within a community of other persons and the larger ecological community. Human and ecological flourishing are not phenomena that are mutually exclusive. They are entwined and interdependent. Author Thomas Crowley uses the term “ecosocial flourishing” as a framework to “highlight[] the interconnectedness of ecological and social concerns” (Crowley, 2010, p. 83). The concerns of humans cannot be fully separated from the concerns of nature. Others have expressed similar sentiments of interconnectedness. In the course of discussing the “(eco)social” construct of intergenerativity, a collection of eight authors wrote in *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science*, “A deeply rooted sense of interconnectedness of human and non-human life is a precondition for ecosocial flourishing” (Whitehouse et al., 2021). The (eco)social construct invites us to focus on the relationships between humans, between humans and other species, as well as the rest of the natural environment. It encourages us to value the differences and to take the minimum moral responsibility to not cause harm through our actions grounded in an ethic of relational responsibility (Whitehouse et al., 2021).

If we take human and ecological flourishing as moral goals of a human life, then the human community ought to aim toward social and ecological justice. The injustices of domination and oppression of humans and nature require an immediate response from all persons and the important social and political institutions of society. Socio-ecological flourishing requires a reversal of hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism, along with prejudiced attitudes toward other humans and nature. It prompts us to ask holistic

questions that account for human and ecological well-being. For instance, when considering whether to displace an Indigenous tribe to make a national park, policy-makers can ask whether the project supports socio-ecological flourishing. When purchasing clothing, consumers can ask whether the products were made in sweatshops and whether any harms of production were avoidable (Mahon, 2009). And, they can purchase items that have the least negative impact on humans and the environment during their life cycle.

The project of socio-ecological flourishing can be motivated by self-interest as well. We should realize that jeopardizing the flourishing of the ecological community through human actions can also negatively affect the very context where human flourishing unfolds. This means we ought to evaluate how our actions impact the environment and minimize damage. For example, we can evaluate the building of a road through a forest that connects two cities based on the effects of the road project on both human and ecological flourishing. If building the road hinders ecological flourishing and not building it does not harm human flourishing, then perhaps we ought not build the road (Kortetmäki, 2017). Since the well-being of the human community is bound up with the well-being of the natural world, its flourishing is important to our own. As Cuomo recognizes, “Some degree of nonhuman flourishing is instrumentally necessary for human flourishing” (Cuomo, 1998, p. 63).

Cuomo says that, while nature has instrumental value to humans, all living beings and systems have appreciable moral significance. As such, whenever possible, humans ought to consider their interest to flourish in their own right. However, she understands that accommodating the interests of every relevant entity in nature is not possible

(Cuomo, 1998). Nature, thus, has both instrumental and non-instrumental value. It is both a means and an end. We can value the Earth community based on an ethic of relations proposed by the (eco)social construct of intergenerativity to include the interests of others in our moral deliberations. This type of thinking is at the heart of morality. While self-interest is an important concern, intertwined with it are the interests of others and nature. This realization may necessitate amending our conception of flourishing so as to aid the flourishing of other humans and nature (Cuomo, 1998). In Cuomo's words:

[V]aluing something beyond its usefulness, or aiming toward the flourishing of others, does not necessarily require forgoing one's own flourishing. The flourishing of others may ultimately serve one's flourishing, or the flourishing of one's own community or species. It may also happen that caring about the flourishing of others results in alterations or compromises on given conceptions of what one's own flourishing requires. (Cuomo, 1998, p. 64)

Flourishing is not necessarily a zero-sum game. It can be a win-win scenario. Promoting the flourishing of others and nature may ultimately serve us and morality may require that we alter our ideas of a flourishing life so that other humans and nature can flourish.

Valuing people and nature for instrumental reasons is not bad in and of itself. However, this sort of valuing may not be sufficient to prevent their domination and oppression. A strong socio-ecological ethic appears to require valuing members of the Earth community for non-instrumental reasons as well. It may necessitate seeing humans as irreplaceable and nature as kin. This entails a deeper sort of valuing that may decrease the likelihood of domination and oppression and increase the chances for appreciating

humans and nature for more than their use value and as morally considerable beings (Cuomo, 1998).

Now that we have an account of human and ecological flourishing and the integrated concept of socio-ecological flourishing, I will explore political, social, and educational pathways that we can take to create a flourishing Earth community. The educational pathway develops moral sensibilities, the social pathway normalizes our helping behaviors, and the political pathway codifies our values into the structures of society. All three pathways reinforce each other.

6.2 Political, Social, and Educational Pathways to Socio-ecological Flourishing

Socio-ecological flourishing requires resources and human cooperation. A basic raw material for human flourishing is the support system of a society. Parents, teachers, mentors, friends, and governments all can assist individuals during different phases of their lives. Critical to flourishing also is the material resources to pursue our goals. For ecological flourishing, nature needs healthy ecological space and humans do minimum harm to nature. The mutual flourishing of humans and nature can be facilitated by political and social structures and educational undertakings that foster that end. I discuss the role of the individual, the state, non-governmental organizations, and education in creating the conditions required for socio-ecological flourishing.

6.2.1 Political Pathway

To promote socio-ecological flourishing, we need a political framework that supports that end. Laws and policies should take into account the well-being of the planet

and ensure that everyone has the basic resources to achieve life satisfaction. I discuss in this subsection three political interventions that can foster socio-ecological flourishing. One intervention is countries helping all citizens meet their basic needs as wealthy ones assist poor ones become self-sufficient. The second intervention is setting an upper limit on income and wealth to minimize social and environmental problems. The third intervention entails governments using other metrics in addition to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or the Gross National Product (GNP) to evaluate socio-ecological well-being. I will also discuss how authoritarianism across the globe may be an impediment to the project of socio-ecological flourishing and how free countries can help nations that are less free become more so.

An important function of governments worldwide ought to be ensuring that its citizens have cradle-to-grave access to resources that help them meet their basic needs. This is important as meeting basic needs is a necessary condition for flourishing. The needs for water, food, shelter, education, transportation, and medical care can be considered basic. We may be able to expand the category of basic needs to include such things as a smartphone and the internet. Philosopher Merten Reglitz argued that internet access is a necessity. He says that “online access is ... necessary ... for fair opportunities to work, study, to engage with government, and to exercise our political freedoms” (Reglitz, 2020, para. 1). Reglitz believes that internet access ought to be part of welfare benefits that cover the costs of basic online access and the equipment for those who are unable to afford it (Reglitz, 2020). As for what falls under basic needs, governments can decide whether such things as the ownership of a smartphone and access to the internet

does so. But all should ensure that their citizens have access to those things that are universally agreed upon as basic needs.

Because some countries do not have the resources to help citizens meet their basic needs, we can make the argument that rich nations have a moral obligation to aid the governments of poor nations to help citizens become self-sufficient. In his 1961 Inaugural Address, President John F. Kennedy recognized this moral duty when he said:

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. (Kennedy, n.d., para. 9)

Perhaps Kennedy is right. Affluent countries ought to help poor ones as preventing unnecessary suffering seems to be a minimum moral duty. Peter Singer recognized as much in his 1972 article entitled "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." After asserting that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care is bad, Singer said, "[I]f it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer, 1972, p. 231). Singer refers to creating the basic conditions for human flourishing. Nations should make certain that no one falls below a threshold for living a minimally decent life by helping them meet their basic needs, and, further, wealthy nations ought to help poor ones become self-sufficient.

Another policy that could be implemented to address the inequalities of socio-ecological flourishing is placing an upper limit on incomes. Similar to a poverty line, below which no one should fall, there can be a riches line, above which no one should

rise. A riches limit would perform the dual duty of lowering social problems and negative environmental impact associated with large income inequalities. Research indicates that inequalities in income contribute to health and social problems. Data from rich countries show that larger income inequalities correlate with lower life expectancy, lower levels of educational performance among children, and lower levels of trust between members of society. They also correspond with higher rates of obesity, mental illness, homicides, imprisonment, and infant mortality (Rowlingson, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

Research also shows that income is an important determinant of environmental impact. Citizens in wealthier nations and wealthy individuals in both rich and poor nations consume more. The construction and use of some luxury commodities, for example, super homes (above 25,000 square feet), super yachts, luxury vehicles (above \$42,000), and private jets, all have enormous ecological footprints. The price of super homes ranges from \$3 million to more than \$100 million dollars. The construction of an average home, which has about 2,200 square feet, requires harvesting about twenty trees while a super home requires 380. The cost of super yachts ranges from \$12 million to \$1 billion. An average super yacht costs \$3 million a year in fuel, maintenance, docking, and staffing. Compared to the top 10 selling vehicles in 2015 (e.g., Honda Accord, Toyota Camry), a luxury vehicle (e.g., Cadillac, Land Rover) produces, on average, 374 more pounds of CO₂ emissions (60 percent more) per 1,000 miles traveled. Private jets have extensive ecological costs stemming from the burning of gasoline and CO₂ emissions (Lynch, Long, Stretesky, & Barrett, 2019). If all these and other luxury items can be made and used without hindering the co-flourishing of humans and nature, then, their construction and use are morally permissible. Otherwise, harm is being done. The needs

of housing and transportation can be met in ways that are less harmful to humans and the environment.

One way to minimize adverse effects on the natural environment is to place an upper limit on income. This would curtail spending that hinders flourishing. The authors of the article “Measuring the Ecological Impact of the Wealthy: Excessive Consumption, Ecological Disorganization, Green Crime, and Justice” write in their conclusion,

[C]onsumptive behaviors of the wealthy, who comprise a small part of the world’s population, has a much more significant ecological impact than the behavior of other economic groups. Based on that observation, one could argue that it is necessary to devise strategies for controlling the conspicuous consumption habits of the wealthy. (Lynch et al., 2019, p. 378)

Consumption that outstrips ecological resource availability damages or disrupts ecosystems. The need for policies that limit incomes seems to be an appropriate way to halt excessive consumption because it is not possible without the financial resources (Lynch et al., 2019).

In a 2017 paper entitled “Having Too Much,” philosopher Ingrid Robeyns introduced the term “limitarianism” into the discourse on distributive justice and discusses the idea of a riches line (Robeyns, 2017). Robeyns writes, “[L]imitarianism advocates that it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life” (Robeyns, 2017, p. 1). According to her, the riches line should be drawn in relation to a certain set of capabilities to which people should have access to fully flourish. This requires answering the question of what our minimum needs are for full flourishing. One such need may be the ability to be mobile within a radius of a few

hundred miles. In that case, one needs to either be able to afford a reliable vehicle or have access to public transport that enables the same functioning. A helicopter or a private jet could be said to be excesses. They would not fall under the capabilities of the non-rich flourishing life. Even if an account of what is necessary for flourishing does not include being able to fly roundtrip from Los Angeles to New York City twice a month or the use of a helicopter or a private jet, a person can still do those things but with a trade-off. They would have to use resources that could have been spent on other goods and services on those things (Robeyns, 2017).

If we equate life evaluation—one of three components of the subjective well-being measure¹⁹—to flourishing, we can use that as a starting point to determine the riches line. Four researchers set out to answer the question of whether there is a point beyond which higher incomes no longer produce greater well-being. Using a representative survey sample of more than 1.7 million people from 164 countries, they found that global income satiation occurs at \$95,000 for life evaluation per person. There was variation across regions. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, life evaluation satiation occurs at \$35,000 while it does so at \$125,000 for Australia/New Zealand (Jebb, Tay, Diener, & Oishi, 2018). Although life evaluation satiation occurs at varying points in different regions, we can still use those figures as starting points for incomes necessary to access opportunities to fully flourish as a non-rich person in that region. We can say that people with incomes above the starting point have more resources than they need to fully flourish and are therefore rich (Robeyns, 2017).

¹⁹ The other two are positive and negative affect (Jebb, Tay, Diener, & Oishi, 2018).

Apart from income, there is also the matter of wealth. Credit Suisse Research Institute defines wealth as the value of financial assets plus real assets (mainly housing), owned by households, minus their debts. The institute's 2021 Global Wealth Report estimated that, in 2020, 55 percent of all adults in the world had wealth below \$10,000, holding 1.3 percent of global wealth and 1.1 percent had above \$1 million, holding 45.8 percent of global wealth (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2021). These data reveal a large global wealth disparity between the top 1.1 percent and the bottom 55 percent of the world population. If we are serious about lowering wealth inequalities to foster socio-ecological flourishing, it makes sense to place a cap on financial assets and channel the excess wealth into a common fund for the good of all humans and nature. Socio-ecological flourishing requires something akin to what *The Guardian* columnist George Monbiot calls private sufficiency and public luxury. Individuals and governments need to understand what enough consumption of natural resources for a good life looks like and halt there. Monbiot writes,

The assumption on which governments and economists operate is that everyone strives to maximise their wealth. If we succeed in this task, we inevitably demolish our life support systems. Were the poor to live like the rich, and the rich to live like the oligarchs, we would destroy everything. The continued pursuit of wealth in a world that has enough already (albeit very poorly distributed) is a formula for mass destitution. (Monbiot, 2019, para. 10)

It would be prudent for governments and their economic advisers to understand the limits of the planet and create policies that support the thriving of the entire Earth community.

This requires examining our real needs for a well-lived life and overturning any assumptions that do not support that.

Governments can foster socio-ecological flourishing by deciding what is worth pursuing in life. At present, most countries around the globe use the gross domestic product (GDP) as the core metric for human prosperity in their nations. The GDP measures the monetary value of all the goods and services produced in an economy during a given period. However, a growing GDP does not necessarily ensure societal well-being (Stiglitz, 2020). In 1968, referring to the gross national product, a related metric, Senator Robert Kennedy said, “[I]t measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile” (Kennedy, n.d., para. 22). Although Kennedy exaggerated the metric’s shortcoming, he understood that a life that is worthwhile is more than “the mere accumulation of material things” (Kennedy, n.d., para. 22). It constitutes more than participating in economic expansion. Kennedy’s account of a worthwhile life included such things as purpose, dignity, wisdom, compassion, personal excellence, community values, the beauty of poetry, the intelligence of public debate, the integrity of public officials, the strength of marriages, and the health of children (Kennedy, n.d.). Plus, growing national wealth is not always accompanied by growing national happiness. Between 1946 and 1970, the United States witnessed remarkable economic expansion, but surveys did not indicate an accompanying upsurge in happiness (Kesebir, 2016).

If GDP does not always reliably measure the collective well-being of society, perhaps other measures can be used in conjunction with it. One such measure is Gross National Happiness (GNH). Although its focus is on human flourishing, it takes into account environmental well-being as well. The nine domains of the index are

psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards (Oxford Department of International Development, n.d.). Bhutan instituted the GNH Index in 1972 to expand the happiness and well-being of its people (Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, & Wangdi, 2012). The index was built upon a 1729 legal code that stated, “[I]f the government cannot create happiness ... for its people, there is no purpose for the government to exist” (as cited in Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, & Wangdi, 2012, p. 6). The index is now incorporated into the country’s constitution, directing the nation “to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness” (as cited in Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, & Wangdi, 2012, p. 6).

On April 2, 2012, the Royal Government of Bhutan hosted the High-level Meeting on Well-being and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm at the United Nations headquarters in New York. About the meeting, Bhutanese prime minister Jigmi Thinley wrote,

On that day at the UN, a global movement was launched to create a new economic paradigm – one that has as its goal human happiness and the well-being of all life on earth; that recognises as key conditions for the new economy ecological sustainability, fair distribution, and the efficient use of resources; and that requires a healthy balance among thriving natural, human, social, cultural, and built assets. (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012, p. 10)

With its priorities of human and environmental well-being, Bhutan serves as an inspiration to other nations. The summary report of the UN gathering was distributed to all UN member states with the hope that each government takes action to move toward

the new economic paradigm (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012). To be sure, this type of high-level global discussion is a good sign, but building the political framework for socio-ecological flourishing requires the cooperation of each state. The United States, a prominent country on the world stage, ought to serve as a leader.

Another index that accounts for the well-being of both humans and nature is the Happy Planet Index (HPI), which scores countries in three categories: human well-being, human life expectancy, and ecological footprint (WEAll, 2021). The index recognizes that GDP growth on its own does not translate to a better life for everyone. Also important are other measures, such as good health, leisure time, positive social relations, and a pattern of resource consumption that respects planetary limits. HPI champions a “Well-being Economy,” which is a broad term that captures “the diverse movement of ideas and actions striving towards a shared vision: an economy that delivers shared well-being for people and planet” (WEAll, 2021, Moving towards a Well-being Economy section, para. 1). The authors of the index recognize that there may not be one blueprint to organize society for socio-ecological flourishing, but each country can learn from others and find ways to address their specific challenges and build on existing successes (WEAll, n.d.). Costa Rica, Vanuatu, and Colombia were the top three countries on the 2021 Happy Planet Index (WEAll, 2021).

One criticism that ecocentrists may raise about these indexes is that both seem somewhat anthropocentric. GNH is about human happiness even though ecological diversity and resilience is one of the nine index domains. Similarly, HPI seems to be concerned about the limits of the planet for its instrumental value to humans. The lack of expressed moral concern for the natural world would be a legitimate complaint. However,

both the anthropocentric and the ecocentric views can result in the same desirable outcomes. For example, humans could stop deforesting the Amazon because of the harms it may cause them or because of the harms it may cause nature. Whether humans protect nature for its instrumental or intrinsic value, if the results are the same, it bodes well for nature. Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors can stem from various perspectives. Consider three varieties of religious environmentalism: religious ecocentrism, religious anthropocentrism, and theocentric environmentalism. Religious ecocentrism sees intrinsic value in nature and shapes attitudes and behaviors that motivate environmental conservation. Religious anthropocentrism is human-centered and sees the rest of nature as resources for human needs, but it also focuses on the moral obligation to protect nature for human sustainability. Theocentric environmentalism is God-centered and reflects the belief that environmental stewardship is a religious duty that humans were directly commanded to undertake. The three cases show that the desire to steward nature may arise from differing motivations, but the end results are similar pro-environmental thought and action, such as tree planting and water conservation (Shehu, 2015).

There are also other indexes, such as the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), that can be used for policymaking. For the year 2020, EPI ranked 180 countries on environmental health and ecosystem vitality, with Denmark, Luxembourg, and Switzerland topping the list for environmental performance. The index uses 32 performance indicators (e.g., PM_{2.5} exposure and CO₂ emissions) across 11 issue categories (e.g., air quality and climate change) and provides practical guidance for countries to achieve environmental sustainability (Wendling, Emerson, de Sherbinin, & Esty, 2020). Another useful index is the Human Development Index (HDI), an instrument

of the United Nations Development Programme. HDI emphasizes that “people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone” (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). There are multiple existing indexes that can measure factors pertinent to socio-ecological flourishing. It is a matter of citizens and governments recognizing this and acting on this knowledge.

I did not intend to enter a thoroughgoing discussion of all the possible metrics that countries can use to make laws and policies that support socio-ecological flourishing. Rather, I wished to make the case that there may be measures other than the GDP and GNP, such as GNH, HPI, EPI, and HDI, that can be used by individual nations to monitor the quality of life of their citizens and the health of the natural world. This requires deciding what it means to live good lives and what kind of moral consideration we ought to give each other and nature. Autonomous groups of peoples and states can formulate public policies that achieve the mutual flourishing of humans and nature.

Achieving socio-ecological flourishing requires the cooperation of all countries. Each one has to form policies that support the endeavor. The cooperation of all actors, however, may be difficult to obtain. An example is countries with authoritarian rule. According to a 2022 report entitled “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule” from Freedom House, an organization that promotes democratic rule, global freedom has been on the decline for sixteen consecutive years. At present, 38.4 percent of the world population live in a “Not Free” country, 41.3 percent in a “Partly Free” country, and the remaining 20.3 percent are in “Free” countries. Among the Not Free countries are Syria, China, and Cuba. Among the Partly Free are Lebanon, Mexico, and Albania. The Free

countries included Ecuador, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Freedom House, 2022). The data suggest that about 80 percent of the world population live under the rule of a version of authoritarianism, an impediment to socio-ecological flourishing. While this is discouraging to hear, governments of the Free nations, and, to the extent possible, Partly Free nations, can take the lead by making the changes necessary to foster socio-ecological flourishing in their own countries.

If authoritarianism hinders socio-ecological flourishing, it can be defeated through a variety of means even though they involve risk to participants. Unarmed civilians have been able to slow, disrupt, or halt authoritarianism using petitions, boycotts, strikes, and other nonviolent methods. Civil resistance has been shown to be twice as effective as armed struggle. Those led by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. are examples. Others include the peaceful east European movements of Solidarity in Poland and Otpor in Serbia as well as more recent civil resistance in Guatemala, South Korea, and Romania (Stephan & Snyder, 2017). We can make the case that it is a moral duty to liberate countries under tyrannical rule not only for the citizens that live there but also for those in other nations. It would be in the interest of global political stability as history indicates that free nations do not go to war with each other. As Garry Kasparov and Thor Halvorssen write in *The Washington Post*, “[D]ictators are always at war, often with a foreign power and always with their own people” (Kasparov & Halvorssen, 2017, para. 9). To increase global political stability and the liberty of all persons, it seems right to intervene in the affairs of countries with dictatorships to overthrow those regimes and build democracies. One way authoritarianism can be challenged is by supporting dissidents through funding, training, support, and strategic advice (Kasparov &

Halvorssen, 2017). Kasparov and Halvorssen, who have experienced the brutality of dictators, say, “[A]s individuals living in a free society, we believe it is our moral obligation to take action to expose human rights violations and to use our freedom to help others achieve theirs” (Kasparov & Halvorssen, 2017, para. 14).

To foster socio-ecological flourishing, it is critical to have a political framework that facilitates that end goal. If all humans and nature are to realize their potential, it is imperative that nations reflect on the question of what values promote the flourishing of both humans and nature and set domestic and foreign policies that serve those ends. Non-governmental pathways to socio-ecological flourishing are also important. I discuss those in the next subsection.

6.2.2 Social Pathway

Not all responsibility for flourishing should rest on the shoulders of our political institutions. The private sector, both individuals and organizations, can take up some of the initiative to create the conditions of socio-ecological flourishing. Once the government helps citizens meet their basic needs or in cases where the government is not effective in doing so, the private sector can step in to meet those needs.

Kathleen Castles is a case study of how a community can help an individual flourish. Castles’ elementary school gym teacher Ken Kuebler was sympathetic to her because her family was poor. Kuebler, who also coached track and cross country at the local high school, recognized her potential when Castles ran the mile in eight minutes in third grade. He gave her running shoes and suitable clothing, drove her to races in other states, and gave her rides home after practice in high school when she needed them. The

runner relied on other coaches, teachers, friends' parents, and church members for various needs, such as food, sports apparel, and summer running camp fees (Flanagan, 2017).

Castles went on to graduate with a Doctor of Psychology degree and qualified twice for Olympic Trials. She works at two Veterans Affairs hospitals, where she coaches running and is also an adjunct psychology professor. As for her athletic achievements, Linda Flanagan, who wrote about Castles in *The Atlantic*, noted, "Castles developed her dazzling athletic talent with the active support of coaches and other adults who filled in when her impoverished family foundered" (Flanagan, 2017, para. 6). Castles' flourishing took place in the context of a community of caring individuals. They gave her opportunities to develop her athletic potential. Also, excelling in sports may have aided her to do well in other areas of life through the spillover effect sports has on other domains. When the state is imperfect in meeting the needs of its people, or if certain needs are outside the scope of the state's role, individuals can contribute to the development of others as they did for Castles.

Various private groups can also help an individual excel in life. To develop athletic talent, for example, nonprofits, corporations, and major league sports teams can mobilize to bring opportunities to all children. This is a goal of the nonprofit Aspen Institute whose Project Play initiative works with organizations to make sports accessible to every child in America (Aspen Institute, n.d.). Kidsports, another non-profit, provides sports programs for Pre-K through 12th graders in the Eugene, Oregon area regardless of financial status, allowing each player to achieve their personal best (Kidsports, n.d.). The nonprofit Every Kids Sports helps remove financial barriers that prevent children from

playing sports by funding sports registration fees for qualifying kids from income-restricted families (Every Kid Sports, n.d.). Corporations, professional sports teams, and other organizations in the private sector can contribute to the development of young people.

Similar to how individual members of society can help other people flourish, they can also help nature flourish. People can take on solo projects or support organizations that are doing conservation work. A project individual persons can undertake is converting ornamental lawns—a common anthropogenic green space in the United States and other countries that are biodiversity poor and offer limited habitat opportunities for native flora and fauna—to more eco-friendly alternatives (Smith, Broyles, Larzleer, & Fellowes, 2015). Ecology and conservation professor Mark Hostetler says that few creatures can use lawns as habitat because they do not produce seeds, nectar, or fruit. With regard to lawn biodiversity, he says, “It is almost like concrete” (Graber-Stiehl, 2018). All across the world, urban and suburban areas with turfgrass landscaping are potential wildlife preserves (Tallamy, 2009). Individuals can limit ornamental lawns and reimagine them in ways that adapt those areas to the local natural environment (Graber-Stiehl, 2018; Rappaport, 1992). In the Northeast, for instance, lawns can be re-created with understory species like dogwood, wild azaleas, native shrubs, ferns, and woodland wildflowers. The aim is to harmonize gardening and landscaping practices with the larger biotic community and ecosystem of the surrounding bioregion, creating healthy ecological space for nature to flourish (Rappaport, 1992).

Apart from individuals doing their part to live harmoniously with nature, non-governmental organizations can also aid the enterprise of socio-ecological flourishing.

People can donate time or money to nonprofits concerned with the conservation of nature. In 2022, Charity Navigator,²⁰ a nonprofit that evaluates other nonprofits, regarded thirty-six environmental nonprofits as highly rated. These organizations were listed in the categories of environmental advocacy, environmental protection and natural resource conservation, environmental health and justice, and environmental education. One example of a highly rated environmental advocacy organization is the Sierra Club Foundation. It promotes education and empowerment of people to protect and improve the natural environment (Charity Navigator, n.d.; Sierra Club Foundation, n.d.). In the category of environmental protection and natural resource conservation, Conservation International was assessed as highly rated. This nonprofit has helped protect more than 2.3 million square miles of land and sea across more than 70 countries (Charity Navigator, n.d.; Conservation International, n.d.).

Through the efforts of individuals and organizations, the private sector can make important contributions to the flourishing of the natural world. The social pathway reinforces and complements the work being performed by political bodies to promote the flourishing of the entire Earth community. The foundation for both the social and political pathways can be laid through the educational pathway, which I discuss next.

6.2.3 Educational Pathway

PreK-12 public schools as well as colleges and universities are places where we accumulate knowledge and deepen understanding about the self and the material world as we learn to think critically. An area where these prominent institutions of society can

²⁰ CharityWatch is another nonprofit that evaluates the effectiveness of other nonprofits (CharityWatch, n.d.).

perform better is moral education. They can heighten students' moral sensibilities to create a more just Earth community. Recent articles point to their shortcomings in forming the character of young people. In a 2016 article in *The Atlantic*, schoolteacher Paul Barnwell writes, "The pressures of national academic standards have pushed character education out of the classroom" (Barnwell, 2016). A similar problem in higher education was highlighted by the authors of a 2021 article in the *Journal of Moral Education*. They note, "While some colleges and universities mention qualities of character on their websites or in their promotional materials, most curricular offerings at higher education institutions are geared instead toward specialized disciplinary study, skill development, or career preparation (Lamb, Dykhuis, Mendonça, & Jayawickreme, 2021). Furthermore, they say, "[F]ew colleges and universities make character an explicit purpose of their curricular mission, even though significant research now shows 'emerging adulthood'—defined as ages 18–29—is a critical period of moral development" (Lamb et al., 2021). There seems to be a failure in PreK-12 and higher education settings in developing moral beings, but it can be corrected. A moral education that points out socio-ecological injustices and points toward socio-ecological justice increases the likelihood for better interactions with each other and nature. Schools, colleges, and universities are fertile ground for moral training which can promote better ways of coexisting in the human and non-human communities on a shared Earth.

Moral education can entail exposing various forms of social and ecological injustices pervasive in the world. For instance, a culture of hyperconsumption exploits the lives of many humans and degrades the natural environment. Modern industrial cultures, such as the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan, which represent about 20 percent

of the world's population, use 83 percent of the world's wealth extracted from nature and human labor (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, & Voelker, 2010). Human labor may come from people trying to escape grinding poverty. As pointed out in a 2016 *Time* article, "Laborers are mistreated, abused, underpaid, and forced to work in harsh conditions — but must continue to work for an abusive employer and an exploitative global system if they hope to make *any* income" (Nair, 2016). Apart from human domination and oppression, undue demand placed on nature takes a toll on the non-human Earth community. Human consumption of natural resources has surpassed the Earth's biological rate of regeneration. Environmental deterioration also occurs through processes such as greenhouse gas accumulation in the atmosphere and the acceleration of ocean acidification and groundwater depletion caused by human activities (Wackernagel et al., 2021). The overconsumption of natural resources by individuals and countries and the associated damages to humans and nature are injustices to both humans and nature. Cultivating moral reasoning in students and designing a curriculum that answers the call of socio-ecological justice can aid in producing the type of consciousness vital to creating a just Earth community.

The demands of socio-ecological justice require educating both the heads and hearts of students to help them become thoughtful planetary citizens. Justice requires a revision of moral values in cases where they do not meet the demands of justice. PreK-12 public schools and public colleges and universities can be cathedrals of character formation. These important institutions of society can serve as fertile ground for preparing young people to become thoughtful citizens of their respective countries and of the Earth. The moral development of the human being is imperative in alleviating both

social and ecological problems and creating a just Earth community. A moral education with the point of view of justice can provide the necessary moral moorings to interrogate social conventions and political structures that perpetuate socio-ecological injustices. Achieving justice requires endorsing the values that promote it and the capacity to reason morally to permit us to arrive at those very values.

6.2.3.1 Moral Reason and Moral Empathy for Socio-ecological Justice and Flourishing. Two important elements in moral development are improving the abilities to reason and enhancing the capacities for empathy. This permits the recognition of injustices and inspires actions to correct them (Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2021). In discussions of moral education in a pluralistic democratic society with multiple moral values, an important question to consider is which moral system or values can we endorse in public educational institutions without being accused of indoctrination. Rawls recognized that conflicts may arise among rational people with divergent viewpoints. In his words,

What is obvious to some persons and accepted as a basic idea is unintelligible to others. The way to resolve the matter is to consider after due reflection which view, when fully worked out, offers the most coherent and convincing account.

About this, of course, judgments may differ. (Rawls, 2005, p. 53)

Reason is an effective tool that we can employ to test the soundness of viewpoints that are in conflict. Rawls advocates for its use to settle moral disagreements even though it may not fully resolve moral differences.

A tenable answer to which values to endorse in schools, colleges, and universities, could be those that promote the common good. Moral reasoning can lead us to those

values. This notion was presented in an article entitled “Preschool as a Wellspring for Democracy: Endorsing Traits of Reasonableness in Early Childhood Education” by Curriculum and Instruction Ph.D. candidate Joy Erickson and philosopher Winston Thompson. Erickson and Thompson draw from Rawls’ book *Political Liberalism* (1993) to discuss how traits of reasonableness can promote the common good. The pair advocates for developing in PreK-12 students traits of reasonableness that aim for better outcomes for all in a democratic society as opposed to an individual or a group. For them,

a citizen exhibits traits of reasonableness if, when faced with the fact that others hold rational views dissimilar from one’s own, the citizen (a) is willing to genuinely consider those views, (b) desires the realization of good outcomes for all involved participants, and (c) is open to compromise in the processes of shared deliberations toward that goal. (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, p. 2)

Based on their account, one value that could be endorsed in public educational settings is the common good and Rawls says that reason can be employed to advance the common good. He writes,

In a reasonable society, ... all have their own rational ends they hope to advance, and all stand ready to propose fair terms that others may reasonably be expected to accept, so that all may benefit and improve on what every one can do on their own. (Rawls, 2005, p. 54)

For Rawls, employing reason may involve subordinating self-interests for the common good although the two are not always mutually exclusive in which case there is nothing to subordinate. The use of reason can lead us to core moral values that can be endorsed in public educational settings. We can make a case for privileging moral values such as a

healthy tolerance for other worldviews, the willingness to compromise when no clear right way can be determined, fairness in our dealings with others, granting moral equality to all people, honoring the freedom of others, respecting the Earth community, and taking responsibility for our thoughts, words, and actions, all of which seem to benefit the common good. Persons with these orientations would act in ways that promote socio-ecological justice.

Public school settings are ideal places to nurture traits of reasonableness in students for at least two reasons. One is that they offer exposure to alternate perspectives. Another is that educational settings can offer the guidance of a competent adult, as early as preschool, as students navigate perspectival differences through critical reflection and civic-minded conversations in a pluralistic world (Erickson & Thompson, 2019). The capacity to reason morally provides a tool required for cooperative living in a democratic society. The development of moral reasoning should be a cornerstone of moral education in public schools.

Another component helpful in behaving ethically is moral empathy, a trait that can be developed in students in conjunction with moral reasoning. It seems fair to say that together they produce a moral response of greater force than either one may on its own. In an article entitled “Empathy and Morality,” Susan Verducci provides insights into the moral status of empathy. While it has a moral valence, there are versions of the trait that can be considered immoral or amoral. The focus here is on the aspect that has a moral valence. Empathy has the potential to motivate actions that promote the good of others for their sake, in which case empathy has a moral basis. But as Verducci points out, “Empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral action” (Verducci, 1999, p.

260). It is not necessary because moral agents can act morally without experiencing empathy. It is not sufficient because moral agents can experience empathy and act in ways that are immoral or amoral (Verducci, 1999). But because empathy has the promise to motivate the empathizer to act in ways that benefit the people for whom empathic feelings are felt, cultivating empathy for this purpose deserves a notable place in moral education. Empathy, when felt with the right motivation, can prevent injustices such as the domination and oppression of humans and nature. Oppressive systems, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and anti-Semitism, have a chance to crumble when students begin to sense the injustices associated with those kinds of systems and take action to dismantle them. Similarly, when they sense ecological injustices, they are more likely to extend it moral consideration. Empathic feelings toward nature, for example, may increase the likelihood that they are more careful with resource use, so that other living things, and perhaps even non-living things, can flourish.

Stretching from Pre-K to higher education, educational institutions are uniquely positioned to enter the lives of citizens in their formative years. They can play a critical role in developing a citizenry that can employ moral reasoning and moral empathy to realize better outcomes for the entire Earth community as opposed to better outcomes for a single person or group. If they are not required by law, PreK-12 public schools and higher education should voluntarily take up the enterprise of cultivating moral reasoning and moral empathy in their students. Moral education can occur in the context of required courses. Each institution can exercise its discretion as to how to incorporate a moral education into core curricular requirements mandated by the government. A potential source that educators and administrators can consult is the journal *Teaching Ethics*, a

publication of The Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum, whose purpose is to stimulate scholarship on ethics and the teaching of ethics in all academic disciplines (The Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum, n.d.). The study of ethics need not be an isolated activity in philosophy departments in higher education. Moral reasoning and moral empathy can be cultivated in the classroom to produce a better citizenry than might be the case without moral education.

6.2.3.2 Education for Social Justice and Flourishing. Education for social justice and flourishing also provides moral education. Social justice education appears in a variety of forms with many proponents. Theories of social justice education were built on the writings of such thinkers as Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Albert Memmi, and Iris Young, arising from such movements of the 1960s and 1970s as Black Power, New Left, and women's liberation. Social justice education may also be grounded in Rawls' ideas of fair treatment and just shares for all members of society (Landreman & MacDonald-Dennis, 2013). Education for social justice can enhance thoughtful understanding of human diversity, improve the ability to critically evaluate inequitable social patterns and institutions, and create pathways to cooperate with diverse others in creating more socially just and inclusive relationships, practices, and structures. When integrated into PreK-12 public schools and offered in higher education, social justice education can raise awareness of oppressive socio-political processes and encourage reflection on one's own position and responsibilities to minimize various forms of oppression (Adams & Bell, 2016). Social justice education can enable individuals to develop the analytical tools necessary to understand the features of structural oppression and their own socialization

within oppressive systems. Educational settings can help students develop an understanding of issues related to justice and injustice in society. Education can also equip students with the skills and tools to translate analysis into action that interrupts and changes oppressive patterns and behaviors in their communities (Bell, 2016).

A principal goal of education for justice and flourishing is to remove the injustices of domination and oppression and to create a world in which all individuals can develop their full capacities (Bell, 2016). One task of social justice education is making students aware of the injustices that are created when differences between groups are sorted and ranked in a hierarchy that unequally confers power and grants social and economic advantages to those higher in the hierarchy. Social justice requires confronting the ideological frameworks, historical legacies, and institutional practices that unequally structure social relations, advantaging some groups at the expense of others. Social justice education exposes multiple forms of domination and oppression and shows the extensive nature of group inequalities present across social institutions. An adequate PreK-12 moral education awakens young people to the injustices of domination and oppression and equips them to take action against them. As Freire recognized, we ought to cultivate a critical consciousness to develop mindfulness of the social and political factors that create domination and oppression and work democratically to reimagine and remake the world in the interest of all (Bell, 2016).

A curriculum with a social justice orientation includes discourses from areas such as democratic education, critical pedagogy, multiculturalism, poststructuralism, feminism, queer theory, anti-oppressive education, cultural studies, postcolonialism, globalization, and critical race theory (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). A 2021 development in

the state of California serves as an example of what social justice education could resemble. California became the first state in the country to require one semester of ethnic studies for high school graduation. Conversations about including ethnic studies in the curriculum began in the 1960s. The act of the California governor signing the requirement into law was preceded by more than five years of intense scrutiny and effort. The requirement first applies to graduates of the year 2030. Debates surrounding implementation are expected as school boards hold public hearings on the courses they plan to offer. To provide education for social justice, however, state mandates are not required. The Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, had already made ethnic studies a graduation requirement (Blume & Gomez, 2021).

Actualizing social justice education could be a protracted and arduous process, but the goal of building a just society is worth the wait and effort. The purpose of ethnic studies in California is “... to help students understand the past and present struggles and contributions of Black, Asian, Latino, Native/Indigenous Americans and other groups that have experienced racism and marginalization in America” (Blume & Gomez, 2021, para. 1). In the signing message of the bill, Governor Gavin Newsom wrote,

America is shaped by our shared history, much of it painful and etched with woeful injustice. Students deserve to see themselves in their studies, and they must understand our nation’s full history if we expect them to one day build a more just society. (Newsom, 2021, para. 4)

Education for social justice and flourishing should be an important element of PreK-12 education as well as higher education as it helps students see others as moral equals and build a just society.

6.2.3.3 Education for Ecological Justice and Flourishing. As we make progress in education for social justice and flourishing, we must also expand the circle of moral concern in our educational system to include the non-human Earth community. But, environmental degradation is also a social justice issue as it destroys water, food, and other resources humans need to survive. Deterioration currently undermines the well-being of 3.2 billion people worldwide, 40 percent of the global population (United Nations, 2021). The aim of ecological justice education is to cultivate moral concern for the non-human natural world. Among other problems, the planet currently faces the triple environmental emergency of biodiversity loss, climate disruption, and escalating pollution (United Nations, 2021). In Chapter 2, I defined ecological justice as healthy ecological space for nature to flourish. Human activity, however, has contributed to the deterioration of ecological spaces. According to research published in 2021, “... few areas of the world remain that can be characterized as having outstanding ecological integrity, (i.e., retaining intact species assemblages at ecologically functional densities)” (Plumptre et al., 2021, p. 8). Many of the ecologically intact areas coincide with territories managed by Indigenous communities whose ways of interacting with nature play a vital role in preserving its integrity. It might be that modern industrial cultures can learn from other cultures to help restore the integrity of the natural environment. In that case, that knowledge can be shared with students (Plumptre et al., 2021).

Educators can help students challenge worldviews that are destructive to nature and introduce students to alternative ideas that foster ecological flourishing. The ways of many cultures serve as models for ecological justice. Some see complex kinship relationships in the world. For example, many Indigenous cultures use kinship metaphors

to name their relationships to entities in the natural world. The Earth is seen as a mother, a giver of life. Other metaphors include grandmother moon and father sky. Animals are regarded as brothers and sisters. This type of worldview can inspire seeing the natural world as a community of living organisms more than mere resources for human use, which raises the likelihood that students will revere and respect the natural world as opposed to reducing it to dead objects that can be studied or profited from. The view of the world as networks of relationships rather than as a ladder of hierarchies can be introduced to students. Seeing nature as a moral equal which deserves the same respect as humans can compel students to have a sense of moral obligation to animals, plants, and the rest of nature. While this does not prohibit them from consuming plants or animals for sustenance, it would encourage minimizing harm to individual creatures and ecosystems (Martusewicz et al., 2015).

Another idea that students can learn is a logic of domination, discussed in Chapter 4. The use of this logic sanctions the domination and oppression of the ecological world. It separates humans from nature and subordinates nature's interests to those of humans, providing a rationale for the ensuing domination and oppression. Educators can help students understand ideas such as a logic of domination that inspire the formation of destructive worldviews. Patterns of belief and behavior that naturalize hierarchical relationships, giving more value and purpose to human communities over the natural systems we depend upon, can be challenged in the classroom. It would make sense to explore with students various concepts and ideologies that drive behavior detrimental to the environment. Some of these ideas and worldviews have persisted across generations in the Western consciousness with deep assumptions rooted in modernity and education

offers a pathway to interrupt the propagation of harmful ideas and perspectives (Lowenstein et al., 2010).

To reverse environmental degradation, educators can explore with students certain concepts of modernity, such as anthropocentrism, commodification, consumerism, mechanism, scientism, and progress, which may interweave with each other and form discourses that shape complex worldviews that structure the perception of, relation to, and behavior in the world (Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2015). Students can learn how the adoption of the anthropocentric view along with the practices of commodification and consumerism can coalesce to facilitate the domination and oppression of nature. Anthropocentrism can place humans at the top of a cosmic hierarchy of every living and non-living thing from God down to rocks and sanction practices such as overfishing of the seas and deforestation of whole hillsides. It can permit the treatment of the non-human world as commodities available for human consumption and the treatment of ecosystems as waste dumps, which can foul land, air, and water. Whether a rock, a beetle, or an ecosystem, the anthropocentric view defines everything by its monetary value. Commodification turns nature into a commodity for sale on the market. Consumerism encourages people to create identities tethered to the products they buy. These types of discourses teach people that happiness is defined by the amount of stuff they possess and exacerbates environmental problems (Martusewicz et al., 2015). Students can explore the question of what they really need to consume for their well-being and how to consume justly and sustainably. When students are encouraged to think critically about how they view nature and how they interact with it, the increased awareness could result in behaviors consistent with ecological justice and

flourishing. Educational institutions can involve students in efforts that connect analysis to action through projects such as the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Running from 2021 to 2030, the program aims to prevent, halt, and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean for the benefit of both humans and nature (United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, n.d.).

Education for ecological justice and flourishing offers many pathways from a variety of cultures across the globe to help change destructive ways of relating to nature and educators can play a crucial role in inspiring minds to care about nature and leave sufficient healthy ecological space for the non-human community to thrive.

6.2.3.4 Education for Socio-ecological Justice and Flourishing. We have a moral obligation to foster human and environmental flourishing. Both moral reason and moral empathy help us to create a better world. Both were exercised to some extent in passing the law that requires ethnic studies in California, a course that promotes the understanding of others (Blume & Gomez, 2021). Moral education expands the moral consciousness of both educators and students and increases the feeling of a shared fate with other humans and the various elements of the Earth community. Socio-ecological justice education can encourage students to see patterns of value-hierarchical thinking that places certain humans over others and humans above nature and a logic of domination that sanctions socio-ecological domination and oppression (Martusewicz et al., 2015). Moral education exposes problematic worldviews, such as androcentrism, Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism that result in the domination and oppression of both humans and nature (Plumwood, 2005).

One of the traits that students should develop in schools is the ability to balance self-interests against the common good of the Earth community. As political leaders work to set the conditions for socio-ecological justice and flourishing, providing a moral education across the curriculum to students of all ages would prime future politicians and voting citizens to work toward creating the circumstances of justice and flourishing. A moral education can equip citizens with the knowledge and capacity to work with diverse others and negotiate differences within communities and inside a nation as well as between members of global society. The development of moral reasoning and empathy and education for socio-ecological justice and flourishing can help us create a world that fosters the mutual flourishing of humans and nature.

If we can build a culture where people care about others and nature from a very young age, we have a better chance for achieving socio-ecological justice and flourishing even if that occurs over generations. A moral education helps students align their attitudes toward more prosocial and pro-environmental behaviors. Addressing social and ecological justice issues in educational institutions can help minimize the domination and oppression of humans and nature because many individuals spend large amounts of time in schools. Educational settings offer many opportunities to bind people to each other and nature based on our shared fate on the planet. Openly considering social and ecological issues in public educational settings under the scrutiny of reason arguably does not constitute indoctrination when organized around the notion of planetary good grounded in the principles of justice and flourishing.

6.2.3.5 Education in Public Spaces for Socio-ecological Justice and

Flourishing. Educational institutions are not the only places where learning can occur. It can take place in the public spaces of cities, towns, and villages where moral values and democratic ideals can be communicated to residents. Advertisements that promote hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism, which seem to cause the domination and oppression of humans and nature, should be restricted. Some of that space could be used for art that promotes socio-ecological flourishing. Further, artwork that conveys the values that hinder the mutual flourishing of humans and nature should be removed.

We can begin the project of reshaping our value system by removing advertising from the many public spaces as it encourages hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism (Rapid Transition Alliance, 2019). The need to operate within planetary limits is particularly salient today. In 2021, Earth overshoot occurred on July 29, the day when human demand for ecological resources and services exceeded what Earth can regenerate in that year (Earth Overshoot Day, n.d.). Cities, towns, and villages across the globe can reduce what some people consider the visual pollution of excessive advertising. In 2007, São Paulo, Brazil's most populated city, introduced the Clean City Law, resulting in a near-total advertising ban (Rapid Transition Alliance, 2019). In a single year, 15,000 billboards and 300,000 oversized storefront signs were removed (see Figure 1) (Mahdawi, 2015). Five years after the ban was introduced, the removal of logos and slogans was thought to "reveal[] a rich urban beauty that had been long hidden" (Curtis, 2011, para. 5). Other cities such as Chennai (India) and Paris (France) as well as several states in the United States have placed restrictions on outdoor advertising. The states of Vermont, Maine, Hawaii, and Alaska are billboard-free (Mahdawi, 2015).



Figure 1. São Paulo, Brazil where many of the 15,000 removed billboards were replaced by street art (Hester, 2015).

To restructure our value system, the restriction of advertising can be accompanied by the removal of artwork that does not support the flourishing of the natural world or human communities. An example is statues of confederate leaders (see Figure 2). They symbolize White power and degrade the social status of African Americans in the United States (Szayna, 2020; Tavernise, 2021). As political scientist Thomas Szayna puts it, “Nothing symbolizes better the continued inferior social status of African Americans in the United States than a statue of a wise-looking Jefferson Davis or a thoughtfully posed Robert E. Lee in a public square of an American city” (Szayna, 2020, para. 8). Szayna argues that, because the Confederate generals fought for the retention of slavery, an immoral practice widely recognized as such at the time, there ought to be no monuments in public spaces that honor them (Szayna, 2020). If our goal is to support each other’s

flourishing, then we should not have symbols of racism or other reprehensible forms of art in the public sphere that promote the domination and oppression of humans.



Figure 2. The statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee towering over Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia (Helber, 2020).

If we care about the mutual flourishing of humans and nature, it seems wise to have some artwork that promotes the good of both people and the planet. In a value plural democratic society, one important value we may want to promote is tolerance for other views and lifestyles insofar as it does not threaten the welfare of other humans and nature. Permanent rainbow crosswalks are one example of appropriate art in a democratic society as it communicates the value of tolerance (see Figure 3). In 2015, Key West became the first place in Florida to install permanent rainbow crosswalks, which represent an open acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. They also reflect the city’s “One Human Family” motto. The vibrant landmarks are located in the heart of the city’s

entertainment district and send the message of seeing others as moral equals (Gutoskey, 2020). About the crosswalks, Key West mayor Teri Johnson said, “The rainbow crosswalks mean that everybody is welcome, everybody is equal, everybody is recognized, and that we do really abide by the ‘One Human Family’ spirit” (Gutoskey, 2020, para. 4). Other cities with permanent rainbow paths include San Francisco, West Hollywood, Seattle, Philadelphia, and Toronto (Gutoskey, 2020).



Figure 3. Rainbow crosswalks in Key West, Florida (Florida Keys News Bureau, 2020).

Through their work, artists can also promote the flourishing of the natural world. Section 6.1.2 mentions that biodiversity richness can be taken as an indicator for ecosystem flourishing. This richness is presently under threat (Díaz et al., 2019b). Rapid biodiversity loss was identified as a major global environmental problem in 1992 during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Wood, Stedman-Edwards, & Mang, 2000). In 2019, the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services published a landmark report grounded in over 15,000 scientific

papers as well as a substantive body of Indigenous and local knowledge. Panel members warned that around one million plant, animal, and insect species are at risk of extinction, many within decades. Human activity is a principal cause of the current loss of biodiversity, which is at least tens to hundreds of times higher than the average for the last 10 million years (Díaz et al., 2019b). British artist Louis Masai took to the streets of England to bring awareness to this problem of biodiversity loss (see Figure 4). One of Masai's depictions was a bumblebee on a wall in Taunton, England in 2015, the same year that researchers strongly linked the rapid declines in bumblebee species across North America and Europe to climate change (Kerr et al., 2015; Johnston, 2021). With aesthetic appeal, Masai pointed to the human need for the services of bees as pollinators (Johnston, 2021).



Figure 4. Bumblebee in Taunton, England (Masai, 2021).

Art is a tool that we can use to create the conditions of socio-ecological justice and flourishing. Through the beauty of art, we can shape human consciousness in a way that promotes flourishing. Part of what this means is not displaying works of art in public spaces that hinder flourishing, such as confederate statues. Similarly, we can minimize the advertisement of goods and services as advertising can promote the kinds of attitudes and behaviors not conducive to flourishing. We can harness the aesthetic value and the moral content of art to help create a world that fosters socio-ecological flourishing.

7. CONCLUSION

I embarked on this thesis journey partly because I got the sense that socio-ecological ethics was not a prominent topic in ethical discourse based on my studies in ethics. Many conversations seemed to be restricted to either social or environmental ethics. The combined concerns of humans and nature did not appear to receive much attention. In my view, we ought to have more conversations that cover all the entities on the planet because we share ecological space with them and our actions can affect them. I undertook this project for other reasons as well. I sought to learn more about what we owe ourselves, each other, and nature and wanted to heighten my understanding of socio-ecological justice and flourishing, learn about the impediments to both, the causes and harms of those impediments, and outline pathways to foster justice and flourishing. Further, I thought this thesis would be a substantive culmination to my master's education and believed doing it can enhance my own moral consciousness.

At the outset of this thesis, I characterized socio-ecological justice as opportunities for all humans to flourish and healthy ecological space for nature to flourish. If flourishing is a moral good, as I have suggested, then we have a moral duty to create the conditions for all people to develop at least a few important capabilities to experience fulfilling lives. Our duty extends further to allow the rest of the natural world—of which we are a part and on which we depend for our own flourishing—to thrive by minimizing the harm we do to it as we meet our basic needs. The flourishing of nature requires setting aside a certain amount of ecological space for it to express itself and not engaging in activities that are destructive to the natural environment.

Two major impediments to socio-ecological justice and flourishing are the injustices of domination and oppression of humans and nature. These two interpenetrating and overlapping injustices restrict life opportunities for people through social and political institutions. Both result in excessive alteration of the natural world, interfering with its self-realization. Domination and oppression can occur through individual agents as well as social and political structures through the unjust exercise of power over humans and nature. The manners in which individuals exercise power can maintain, create, or disrupt conditions of domination and oppression, either facilitating or constraining flourishing.

Domination and oppression of humans and nature have multiple causes. A few major reasons are the orientations of hypermaterialism, greed, and hyperconsumerism. It is true that members of society need to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services to flourish, but these activities need to occur in the context of understanding that we share a planet with finite resources with other species. A finite planet does not allow for the infinite use of natural resources. The consumer culture throughout the globe, particularly in industrialized countries, promoted by both corporations that seek profits and governments that aim to grow their economies, contributes to social and environmental decay. The acquisition of things that are not necessary for a flourishing life should not displace more worthwhile activities, such as spending time in nature, places of worship, and with friends and family. About consumption, professors Stephen Dovers and Colin Butler write:

The environmental impact of all this consumption is huge. The mass production of goods, many of them unnecessary for a comfortable life, is using large amounts

of energy, creating excess pollution, and generating huge amounts of waste. ...

Individuals living in developed countries have, in general, a much bigger ecological footprint than those living in the developing world. (Dovers & Butler, 2015, Population Consumption section)

While the mass consumption of unnecessary goods is a problem, other items such as super yachts and super homes used by a limited number of people also have large ecological footprints.

The harmful effects of domination and oppression seem to be self-evident. Both hamper humans and nature from realizing their potential and living worthwhile existences. Blameworthiness for the domination and oppression of humans and nature varies from individual to individual. The consumption patterns of some are more damaging to socio-ecological justice and flourishing, but many of us participate in systems that dominate and oppress. The point to keep in mind is that sometimes we have some capacity to help shape the lives of others and the health of the planet for the better.

The first pathway to socio-ecological flourishing that I discussed is good governance. As a community, we can exert pressure on governments to initiate structural changes that would tackle the problem of forced complicity in social and political systems destructive to humans and nature. Governance based on the values of justice and flourishing is a cornerstone for those two ends. Instead of the Gross Domestic Product and the Gross National Product, perhaps we ought to pursue other metrics, such as Gross National Happiness or Happy Planet Index, that measure the well-being of people and the planet. For better governance, citizens should vote for politicians who will stand up for fairness in human affairs and ecological matters. This includes such things as recognizing

that wealth accumulation in the millions of dollars is unnecessary for a good life. Perhaps it is wise to place caps on incomes and wealth to minimize the domination and oppression associated with high incomes and excessive wealth. The government can promote conscientious consumption campaigns on cruelty-free, fair-trade, and eco-friendly goods and services and aid in making them the default option for consumers by making these options more affordable, convenient, and accessible for widespread adoption.

The second pathway mentioned to socio-ecological flourishing is a robust social network where people lift each other up and care for nature. While good governance is an integral part of a flourishing Earth community, the private sector can reinforce and compensate for any shortcomings on the part of governments. Individuals and organizations can foster socio-ecological flourishing in conjunction with the state. Examples are non-profits providing children opportunities to develop their athletic potential and those working to conserve land and sea across the globe.

The third pathway discussed to promote socio-ecological flourishing is moral education. At the root of making changes is awareness of the problem. A 2017 poll indicated that 75 percent of US adults believed that they usually buy humane products when only one percent of food animals live on non-factory farms (Zampa, 2019). This reveals a problem with a lack of awareness. An appropriate solution to this problem is moral education as it can enhance students' moral reasoning and moral empathy. Further, it can help them think about concepts such as socio-ecological justice and flourishing and how their actions impact others and nature.

Flourishing requires a consciousness that challenges unsustainable consumption patterns based on manufactured needs. A flourishing society would orient production to the satisfaction of authentic needs, such as water, food, clothing, and shelter and basic services such as health, education, and transportation. This approach increases the likelihood of the entire world population being able to meet its basic needs than systems that permit a minority of the global population to accumulate wealth at the expense of other humans and nature. This shift in thinking can be facilitated by a moral education that inspires people to profoundly care about other humans and nature. Warren's logic of domination is an apt example of how our conceptions of other humans and nature factor into our attitudes and behaviors. The logic shows how faulty beliefs shore up unjustified relationships of domination and oppression (Warren, 2000). The development of a moral consciousness seems necessary for the mutual flourishing of humans and nature because it can inspire a desire to create a socially and ecologically just world. Education can help foster caring attitudes that can play an important role in creating the conditions for non-domination, non-oppression, justice, and flourishing.

For social justice, we ought to find ways to lessen the inequalities of wealth between rich and poor countries as well as within countries so that people everywhere can prosper and contribute to the global community. All people should have access to the material resources essential for flourishing so that they can develop capabilities fundamental to flourishing. As Alexander puts it, "A society that fosters those capabilities that are necessary for human flourishing is morally better than one that is either indifferent or (even worse) hostile to their manifestation" (Alexander, 2018, p. 9). All societies should aim to create opportunities for flourishing, and those that are succeeding

should help those that are not. Flourishing requires ethical reflection and an understanding of the nature of a good life. We have to form moral foundations that emphasize the importance of fairness and the avoidance of harm. The fulfillment of human potential is a mark of a well-lived life and bad luck should not foreclose opportunities to develop the capacities needed for flourishing. A life cannot be expected to go well unless a person develops a few capabilities that can help them flourish. This means that all persons ought to have access to important needs, such as water, food, clothing, shelter, health care, and education and be free from domination and oppression.

Not feeling connected to others and nature can lead to the domination and oppression of both. Philosopher Val Plumwood recognized that the value system of anthropocentrism assumes a deep division between humans and nature even though humans are embodied beings who are part of nature. The presumption is that humans are somehow different in kind from the rest of material nature. The difference is believed to be the human mind. The Western tradition further refines the mind-matter division into a reason-nature division. Plumwood shows how this dualism informs many categories of Western thought. For example, it renders inferior all the groups that became associated with nature rather than reason: women, the working-class, the colonized, the Indigenous, and the other-than-human world, legitimizing their domination. Perhaps it would help us feel connected to nature if we adopted an ethic that regards humans as part of nature, as Plumwood does (Mathews, 2008). In addition to recognizing the instrumental value of nature, seeing intrinsic value in it can help foster respect for it.

Humans are part of an interdependent global ecosystem, existing in relationship with other humans and nature. Basic science tells us that a web of connections links all

living and nonliving things on earth. For instance, plants need carbon dioxide, which is exhaled by humans and other animals, and the latter need oxygen, which is released by the former. Living and nonliving things, to various extents, depend on other things for their flourishing. We are interconnected to other humans and the rest of nature. A sense of interconnectedness can guide us toward conditions of non-domination and non-oppression. Philosopher Nancy Jecker and physician Zohar Lederman discuss interconnectedness and the need for an ethic of global solidarity from the perspective of the COVID-19 pandemic. They say that an ethic of global solidarity

requires reckoning with the implications of our interconnected world. Just as pollutants in the sky and degradation of the earth endanger people everywhere, the SARS-CoV-2 virus anywhere threatens people everywhere. In today's world, the ethic that ought to be front and center is solidarity with human beings everywhere. (Jecker & Lederman, 2021, p. 4)

Developing a sense of interconnectedness with other people and the rest of the natural world can help us grow an ethic of care.

Part of living a good life is living an ethical life. The latter requires entering into proper relations with humans and nature. I have discussed important ways we can be more ethical in our relationships with humans and the biosphere. The more we can live our lives in states of non-domination and non-oppression the better the chances for socio-ecological flourishing. Such ethical living requires the discipline to regulate the appetite for unnecessary material riches. To facilitate relationships of non-domination and non-oppression, we can utilize our understanding of why humans seek to dominate and oppress. We can also use our knowledge of how domination and oppression harms both

humans and nature. This can help us develop an aversion to domination and oppression and minimize the problems of environmental destruction and social injustice fueled by hypermaterialism, greed, hyperconsumerism, and a logic of domination.

We have considered political, social, and educational pathways that can move us into conditions of non-domination and non-oppression that hold the promise for socio-ecological justice and flourishing. For more harmony between humans and nature, we need to change the policies that permit the domination and oppression of humans and nature and shift to frameworks that show respect toward both. Domination and oppression of people and nature are moral wrongs, and, as a global society, we ought to create the conditions necessary for all members of the earth community to flourish. A just world removes unfair advantages and disadvantages so that all people can live meaningful lives and the various components of the natural world can flourish. The social and ecological problems we face today may seem intractable, but they are not insurmountable. Society's social and political institutions and the development of a moral consciousness can aid us to reach states of socio-ecological flourishing.

We can positively impact our circle of influence and create the conditions to live in ways with other people and nature that promote socio-ecological flourishing. Exactly how a person or a community fosters flourishing depends on the context and the aptitudes of the relevant people. As individuals and as collectives, we can address such problems as global inequality, institutional racism, patriarchy, climate change, and environmental degradation. Social and ecological violence need not be abiding features of human existence. There are ways of living without harming other people and destroying the natural environment. Just relations among humans and between humans and nature

through societal institutions and right attitudes can create a better world. This may demand an inner revolution that develops a moral consciousness that gravitates toward the mutual flourishing of humans and nature.

Whether the changes we need to make to minimize domination and oppression and foster socio-ecological flourishing should be incremental or radical is a question we should consider. Given the damage that harmful attitudes are wreaking, a radical attitudinal change may be necessary. If socio-ecological flourishing calls for a radical shift in how we operate in this world, then that is what we ought to do. Delaying changes because they are inconvenient for people who are benefiting, but perhaps not fully flourishing because others are languishing, is not a good reason to do so. Regarding the magnitude and swiftness of change, Kretz writes:

I have never been persuaded by arguments suggesting that resistance movements are asking for too much too soon, that change takes time, and that if we are not patient the world as we know it will fall apart. If the world needs radical change because it is shaped by the contours of oppression, its collapse is not my concern; rather, its continuation is. (2018, p. 212)

In his 1963 letter from Birmingham jail, King writes something similar in the context of the struggles of the Black community to obtain civil rights. He invoked a sense of urgency to bring about justice when he said, “We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied’” (King, Jr., 2018, para. 13). Many would agree that we are overdue for socio-ecological justice. While it may be delayed, it is still worth achieving.

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