

Sustainable persons, sustainable companies

On the ethical meaning of sustainability for business ethics



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Master thesis in Applied Ethics

To Robin and Connor,

*I hope that by the time you little bundles
of auntie joy can actually read this thesis,
it has become redundant.*

Master thesis

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Abstract

Although the flexible nature of the concept sustainability has allowed various stakeholders to adapt the concepts to their own purposes, its conceptual ambiguity hinders the academic debate and the implementation of sustainability measures by companies. This is problematic, because sustainability issues require urgent action. Therefore, this thesis explores what would be the added value if academic and professional business ethicists integrate the ethical dimensions of sustainability in their approach to sustainability issues. Answering this question goes beyond existing approaches in business ethics. I propose to use a new type of methodology – the ‘BEST approach’ – that combines insights from different sub disciplines of applied ethics, including business ethics (‘BE’), sustainability ethics (‘S’), and the ethics of technology (‘T’). After exploring the way business ethicists currently approach sustainability, Chapter 2 critically examines the integrative approach to sustainability ethics by Becker (2012), in which the idea of a *sustainable person* is central. Two main problems with Becker’s account are identified: i) the lack of integration of moral concepts that go beyond the subject-object dichotomy into his normative framework, and ii) the lack of an integrative account of the role of companies in his approach to sustainability ethics. Chapter 3 addresses the first problem by discussing the merits of a *posthumanist ethical framework*, developed in the field of the ethics of technology by Verbeek (2011). Verbeek’s normative approach allows Becker to systematically move beyond the modernist ontological division between human and the rest of the world. Chapter 4 shows that the role of companies in sustainability ethics is two-fold: as *a moral agent*, and as a *collective of persons*. It specifically focuses on the relation between companies as collectives of persons with regard to the development of sustainable persons. It is argued that *corporate responsibility* and *integrity*, traditionally the ‘outward’ and ‘inward’ looking parts of business ethics, are actually two ways of ‘doing’ *sustainability*. The final chapter brings together the insights from the BEST approach, and concludes with implications of the conceptual and ethical work done in this thesis for business ethics.

Preface

We first dream up a sketch of a better world, and only then try to formulate some principles, which, if acted upon, might bring that world into existence. Rational argumentation about moral issues always lags behind. Reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken. (Rorty 2006, 378)

In today's modern (western) societies, *sustainability* is our 'sketch of a better world'. Sketches are necessarily vague, denoting the contours and main lines of the picture imagined. If there were no contours at all, or if the picture were printed in detail, sustainability could not figure as an orientation for collective action. However, it seems that we are still at loss to create a picture of this better world that is clear enough to guide the change necessary to structurally fight societal and global issues such as climate change, the destruction of ecosystem services, and poverty.

Sustainability professionals and passionates do not often question the 'goodness of green' in a structured open dialogue. This led me to wonder whether this omission actually conceals some important questions. I believe that it does. Sustainability is not only a 'sketch of a better world', but also a 'sketch of a better us'; rendering sustainability is not just about what to do, but also about how to live and be a good person. In other words, sustainability is an answer to fundamental ethical questions. Realising this, conceptual and ethical work could substantially contribute to turning the sketches of a better world and of us into drawings, ready to be filled with colour and life. My thesis aims to put some clear lines on paper.

Writing an essay is not an isolated practice. It is a way to enter into an on-going conversation, connecting the author to discussion partners and ideas that transcend her own time and place. There are innumerable sources of inspiration that have – sometimes without leaving a conscious trace – lent me the words and fragments of ideas that together helped me build this thesis. In this process I would like to thank Mariëtte van den Hoven and Muel Kaptein for their helpful comments, suggestions, and critical notes. A special thanks goes to Jochem, my mother and Steven, for all the ways in which they have supported me to realise this thesis. I could not have wished for a better place to write this thesis than in the beautiful and loving countryside. And finally (although by far not exhaustively) thank you my Ethics buddies, for sharing the ups and downs of writing.

Just as writing is not an isolated practice, nor is reading. I invite you to challenge the ideas expressed in this thesis, to engage in inspired discussion, and – perhaps most importantly – to ask good questions.

Introduction

Although the flexible nature of the concept *sustainability* has allowed various stakeholders to adapt the concept to their own purposes, its conceptual ambiguity hinders the academic debate and the implementation of sustainability measures by companies. This is problematic, because sustainability issues – such as climate change, the destruction of ecosystem services, poverty, and access to clean drinking water – require urgent action. This thesis aims to contribute to ‘freeing up’ the academic debate about sustainability by addressing the *ethical* meaning of sustainability, and to contribute to professional business ethics by explicating the role of corporations in *sustainability ethics*. The question central in this thesis is:

What would be the added value if academic and professional business ethicists integrate the ethical dimensions of sustainability in their approach to sustainability issues?

The focus on business ethics here is inspired by the idea that companies play an important role in both the causation and solution of sustainability issues, and the observation that business ethicists do not always ask the right questions with regard to sustainability. Often, still, they try to make ‘sustainability’ digestible for companies by moulding it into a business case or by translating it into a *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) programme. Sustainability, however, is not just about balancing economic, environmental, and social considerations. Underneath the implementation measures, it is an internationally endorsed answer to the question ‘In what kind of world do I want to live, and what kind of person do I want to be?’. This last part of the question is an important addition to the UN document *The Future We Want* (2012), which asks: ‘what kind of future do you want?’.

Answering the central question of this thesis brings together both the reflective practice of academic business ethicists and the way business ethics is ‘being done’ by companies. It also transcends the domain of business ethics. As will be argued more fully in Chapter 1, a proper understanding of the ethical dimensions of sustainability requires business ethics to be informed by other approaches in applied ethics, such as sustainability ethics and the ethics of technology. Thus, this thesis calls on business ethicists to broaden their perspective, and connect to other normative approaches. At the same time, it invites ethicists of other domains of applied ethics to also look for new ways to collaborate. Such an investment and cross-fertilisation will deepen the understanding of sustainability issues and approaches, and opens space for conceptual surprise that may prove

valuable to the analysis and solution of sustainability issues.

In this thesis I show the fruitfulness of such a collaborative approach by using a new methodology I call the 'BEST' approach, drawing on insights from Business Ethics ('BE'), Sustainability ethics ('S'), and the ethics of Technology ('T').

BE Chapter 1 (the 'BE' of 'BEST') explores how sustainability is approached in academic and professional business ethics. The aim of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive historical overview of the meaning and use of the concept 'sustainability' in business ethics, but rather to show why it is important to investigate further into the meaning of sustainability. It appears that for a full examination of the (ethical) meaning of sustainability and the related role of companies, it proves valuable to look at other fields of applied ethics – in particular the emerging field of sustainability ethics.

S Chapter 2 (the 'S' of 'BEST') critically examines Becker's approach to sustainability ethics. Becker (2012) provides an analytical framework that clarifies the ethical meaning of sustainability and can direct the analysis of sustainability issues. However, two main problems with Becker's account are identified: i) the lack of integration of moral concepts that go beyond the subject-object dichotomy into Becker's normative framework, and ii) the lack of an integrative account of the role of companies in Becker's sustainability ethics.

T Chapter 3 (the 'T' of 'BEST') addresses the first problem by discussing the merits of a *posthumanist ethical framework*, developed in the field of the ethics of technology by Verbeek (2011). This posthumanist ethical framework can plausibly be connected to Becker's approach to sustainability ethics, and allows it to go systematically move beyond the modernist ontological division between human and the rest of the world.

The investigation of the second problem, i.e. the role of companies in Becker's approach to sustainability ethics, takes us 'back' to the field of business ethics (the 'BE' of BEST). Chapter 4 shows that the role of companies in sustainability ethics is two-fold: by being a *moral agent*, and by being a *collective of persons*. A discussion of Korsgaard's view on integrity shows that *CSR* and *integrity*, traditionally the 'outward' and 'inward' looking parts of business ethics, are actually two ways of 'doing' *sustainability*. Finally, Chapter 5 harvests what cross-fertilising the different fields of applied ethics through the BEST approach has yielded. It concludes with implications of the conceptual and ethical work done for both professional and academic business ethicists.

Chapter 1 Business Ethics

This chapter provides a discussion of how sustainability currently is approached in academic and professional business ethics. This is the first step in exploring what would be the added value if academic and professional business ethicists integrate the ethical dimensions of sustainability in their approach to sustainability issues. The aim of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the current meaning and use of the concept 'sustainability' in business ethics, but rather to show why it is important to investigate further into the meaning of sustainability.

1.1 A conceptual prelude: academic and professional business ethics

Business ethics refers to both the academic field of business ethics, and the ethics practiced by companies. An intuitive way to understand the relationship between the 'academic' and the 'professional' sense of the term *business ethics* is to conceptualise the first as the systematic reflection on the moral features of the latter. Another way is to see professional business ethics as the application of the 'high theories' of academic business ethics, evoking similarities to the traditional view of technology as applied science. However, in reality, there is no clear-cut relation or distinction. Rather, *business ethics* denotes a diverse array of practices that are not univocally labelled one or the other (Marcoux 2008).

First, *academic business ethics* is characterised by a variety of methods, and even its legitimate subject is contested within the field itself. In practice, the field contains not only attempts at applying established ethical theories, but also a diversity of projects and theories, ranging from empirical studies of the moral attitudes of business people to legal compliance programmes (Ibid). A glance on recent contributions to the *Business Ethics Quarterly* and the *Journal of Business Ethics* confirms that business ethics goes beyond reflection on and application of traditional theories to modern business practice. Arguably, the academic field of business ethics characterises itself simply by the fact that the academic contributions all place themselves under this heading (Ibid).

Second, *professional business ethics* refers to the explicit and implicit ethics that businesses practice. Corporate ethics can be formalised in a code of conduct that prescribes how representatives of the company should act. It can also be materialised in a CSR programme that, for example, is aimed at eliminating child labour from the supply chain of a company. Professional business ethics in this sense is under moral scrutiny of the public. This showed in the moral outrage directed at Dutch retailers after the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh, which killed

over a thousand textile workers (NRC 2013).

In sum, *academic* business ethics and *professional* business ethics are distinguished, because they denote different, albeit related, practices. As will be illustrated in Chapter 5, this distinction proves useful in terms of the implications of the conceptual work done in this thesis. The implications for *academic* business ethics concern the research agenda, methods and conceptual framework, whereas the implications for *professional* business ethics concern practical measures of doing and organising business. However, it should be kept in mind that the lines between both terms remain blurred.

1.2 Sustainability in academic business ethics

In order to get a preliminary sense of the ways in which academic business ethicists approach sustainability, it is insightful to take a look at the two leading scientific journals of the field of business ethics: the *Business Ethics Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Business Ethics*. A quick scan of the body of articles shows that in the last five years the concept *sustainability* comes up quite often. However, among the 695 hits of ‘sustainability’ in the *Journal of Business Ethics* are virtually no articles that critically examine the moral dimensions of sustainability in an integrative way. Surely, authors acknowledge the normative dimensions of sustainability when they describe the term as an ideology (Borland & Lindgreen 2013, 174), a crucial goal for corporations (Florea et al. 2012, 393), a desirable development path of societies (Hahn et al. 2014), implying moral attitudes that inform managerial decision-making (Thomas & Lamm 2012, 191), and as corporate sustainability *responsibilities* (Strand 2013).

Authors generally also agree that there is no consensus on the precise meaning of *sustainability*. However, most take the traditional definition of the Brundtland Report – which defines the term sustainable development as a ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED 1987, 43) – as a starting point (e.g. Hahn et al. 2014; Borland & Lindgreen 2013; Strand et al. 2014; Florea et al. 2012). Often this is supplemented with a variation on the *triple bottom line approach*, *TBL*, *3BL*, the *three pillars of sustainability*, or the three P’s, *profit*, *planet*, and *people*. All these terms refer to the approach popularised by Elkington (1997). He defines sustainability as the ‘principle of ensuring that our actions today do not limit the range of economic, social, and environmental options open to future generations’ (Elkington 1997, 20). Sustainability is achieved when the triple bottom line – economy, environment, and society – is balanced. Elkington provides a framework that appeals to companies, because it provides a way to measure progress against a set of indicators that is communicable and can be done through accounting, auditing, and reporting (93). This is still a

popular way for both academic and professional business ethicists to discuss sustainability (Ten Bos & Painter-Morland 2013).

Besides the articles that directly concern sustainability, most academic contributions address aspects of it, such as: intergenerational justice; social and environmental performance; the changing roles of business in society; business and human rights; sustainable poverty alleviation; (political) CSR; reinterpreting profit; stakeholder management; private governance structures; sustainability reports; ethical and sustainable leadership; green washing; environmentally friendly products; organisational sustainability; and the legitimacy of corporate sustainability officers. What these articles have in common is a focus on practical implementation – or at least conceptual work for the sake of implementation – rather than philosophical analysis of the meaning of sustainability. From this the observation can be distilled that in academic business ethics there is not much critical discussion of the meaning of sustainability.

Ten Bos & Painter-Morland (2013) share this observation. They criticise the tendency of business ethicists to focus on making *sustainability* digestible for business people, through, for example, the triple bottom line approach. This is problematic, according to them, because for one thing, business ethicists are not successful in doing so. The concept of *sustainability* remains too vague and ambiguous to direct the implementation of it by companies. Moreover, even though most large corporations pay lip service to sustainability issues, they do not structurally change the way they do business. Further, models that build on the triple bottom line approach give firms an unjustified faith in the measurability and pliability of the world, Ten Bos & Painter-Morland argue. This optimism is unfounded because the reality is too complex, and no one really knows what the objective *is*. This ‘question behind the question’ is often overlooked by traditional business ethics. Ten Bos & Painter-Morland wonder: ‘shouldn’t we think about classical oppositions such as ‘culture’ versus ‘nature’, and ‘human’ versus ‘animal’? (Ten Bos & Painter-Morland 2013, 178).

1.3 A conceptual interlude: sustainability and sustainable development

Before discussing how *professional* business ethicists approach sustainability, one conceptual distinction has to be addressed. In the literature, the terms *sustainability* and *sustainable development* are often used interchangeably (e.g. Strand et al. 2014). The concepts are, obviously, closely related. However, they do not denote the precise same thing. An intuitive conceptual distinction would be that *sustainability* refers to an ideal (a dot on the horizon) and that *sustainable development* points at the way to get there (Borland & Lindgreen 2013, 174). This is reflected in the dominant view is that ‘sustainable development is continued economic growth made more environmentally sensitive *in order to* raise living standards globally and break the link between

poverty and environmental degradation' (UN 2010, 10; emphasis added).

However, this conception can be criticised on the ground that sustainable development is not just an instrumental way of being or doing, but rather a developmental ideal. Arguably, sustainability challenges the traditional interpretation of development as economic growth. Others argue that the dominant conception of sustainable development is too anthropocentric and put forward a more ecocentric interpretation, that is necessarily less instrumental (Borland & Lindgreen 2013, 173). Furthermore, sustainability as a guiding principle is not a static dot on the horizon, but rather an open dynamic concept, which shows in the variety of interpretations and usages. In what follows, 'sustainability' is therefore used as an umbrella term under which both *sustainability* and *sustainable development* are nested. A conceptual distinction neither does justice to the way the terms are used, nor does it here provide added insight into their meaning. Using *sustainability* as an umbrella term in this way emphasises the open-ended and fluid nature of the concept.

1.4 Sustainability in professional business ethics

Within the private sector, sustainability has been on the agenda in the form of corporate responsibility or CSR (UN 2010, 10). However, the meaning of CSR is also ambiguous; it means many different things to many different people (WBCSD 2000, 3). It can denote organisational sustainability, reflecting the need for continuance and financial viability of a company in the market economy. Most often, however, it refers to some balance of the three 'pillars of sustainability': economy, environmental, and society. The materialisation of this in corporate (moral) responsibilities, however, is ambiguous, and some argue even that CSR is a concept in disarray. As with sustainability, this is deemed problematic, because the diversity in meaning and conceptual models hampers both the academic debate and implementation by companies (Van Marrewijk 2003, 96). In order to conceptually save the efforts of businesses to act ethically, many scholars have proposed new or adjusted interpretations of CSR: Visser's (2010) move towards CSR 2.0, or systemic or radical CSR; Van Marrewijk (2003) and Hahn et al. (2014) on corporate sustainability; Porter & Kramer's (2011) 'creating shared value' (CSV) model.

Van Marrewijk (2003), for example, argues that it is not possible to pinpoint *the* features of CSR or corporate sustainability (Van Marrewijk 2003, 103). According to him, the right thing to do for businesses is context specific. He distinguishes several ambition levels of corporate sustainability that companies can choose between (e.g. compliance driven, profit-driven, or holistic). These different approaches allow firms to do business in such a way that it includes 'social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interaction with stakeholders' (95). Here, Van Marrewijk stays close to the traditional interpretation of CSR based on the three pillars of sustainability, but adapts it

in such a way to do justice to the contexts in which firms operate. The Dutch Social Economic Council (SER) and MVO Nederland share the idea that the content of the corporate responsibility is tailor-made, bound to time, place, problems and partners (SER 2000, 94; Lageweg 2014).

From this it can be tentatively concluded that in professional business ethics there is no consensus as to exact the meaning of CSR. The interwoven meanings of CSR and *sustainability* has even led Strand et al. (2014) to use the terms as interchangeable ‘umbrella constructs’, depicting a variety of loosely related phenomena. In their approach, ‘sustainability’ and ‘CSR’ have under their umbrella terms such as *stakeholder engagement*, *stewardship*, *triple bottom line*, and *creating shared value* (Strand et al. 2014, 2). In doing so they refer to a special edition of The Economist, in which the phrase ‘corporate responsibility – or sustainability or whatever’ was used to describe efforts of businesses in society (Economist 2008, 13). However, this thesis does not follow Strand et al. in their conclusion that since sustainability and CSR can be used as interchangeable umbrella constructs, they *should* also be used as such. Chapter 2 shows that the full meaning of sustainability is wider than CSR.

1.5 Problem

From the previous paragraphs, two main reasons can be distilled as to why the ambiguous meaning of *sustainability* is problematic from a business ethics perspective. First, the vagueness of the concept *sustainability* hinders its translation into structural measures of implementation for companies. In business ethics, there is not an approach that critically examines the meaning of sustainability in an integrative way. Referring to CSR in this context is hardly helpful, because CSR does not have a clear definition either. Second, the focus of both professional and academic business ethicists on digesting *sustainability* into something implementable for companies obscures some fundamental questions that remain unasked. As far as I am aware, no dominant approach in the field of business ethics critically examines the meaning of sustainability in order to overcome the conceptual ambiguity.

1.6 Therapy: the BEST approach

I argue that a proper understanding of the ethical dimensions of sustainability requires business ethics to be informed by other approaches in applied ethics, such as sustainability ethics and the ethics of technology. What is necessary is an inter-sub-disciplinary approach, acknowledging that the ethics of sustainability is complex, and requires more than the direct application of traditional ethical approaches to the issue of sustainability. Therefore I propose a new type of methodology I call the

'BEST' approach, drawing on insights from Business Ethics ('BE'), Sustainability ethics ('S'), and the ethics of Technology ('T'). As far as I am aware, this approach is new. It cross-fertilises the field of applied ethics by learning from different theories, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks to better understand the role of companies in sustainability ethics, and the role of sustainability in business ethics.

In particular, the emerging field of sustainability ethics, as developed by Becker in *Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research* (2012), gives a fruitful impulse to the stalled debate about the meaning of *sustainability* in business ethics. Therefore, the rest of this thesis engages with Becker's approach to sustainability ethics in order to explore its merits for business ethics. Now, another author's methodology for answering the central question of this thesis could lead him or her to *other* fruitful collaborations of different fields of applied ethics and philosophy. Someone might come up with, for example, 'the BEDTER approach', examining and combining approaches of Business Ethics ('BE'), Deontology ('D'), Technology Ethics ('TE') and Rawls' theories of justice ('R'). I want to emphasize that it is not my aim here to argue that the 'BEST' approach is better than the 'BEDTER' approach. Rather, it is to show that such a collaboration of ideas and methodologies between different fields of applied ethics is in fact valuable and fruitful.

Chapter 2 Sustainability Ethics

In the previous chapter it was argued that from a business ethics perspective, the ambiguous meaning of *sustainability* is problematic. Therefore, this chapter further investigates the meaning of sustainability, by critically examining the approach of Becker (2012). At the heart of his sustainability ethics, Becker employs a deep, integrative conception of *sustainability* that evolves around a relational identity of the moral person. Arguably, his effort in *Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research* puts 'sustainability ethics' on the map, as an academic sub discipline of applied ethics with its own methodology and research agenda. Therefore, the critical investigation of Becker's *sustainability ethics* in this chapter forms the 'S' of the BEST approach. §2.1-2.4 sketch Becker's approach to sustainability ethics and place it in its philosophical context. The final paragraph evaluates Becker's account in light of the central question of this thesis. Specifically, three potential problems with Becker's normative framework are discussed.

2.1 The meaning of sustainability: 3 elements

Becker (2012) argues against critics who conclude from the fluid nature of the concept *sustainability* that it is in fact not an important or helpful concept in analysing and approaching sustainability issues. According to Becker, sustainability is not a mere buzzword. On the contrary, the modern term *sustainability* is a fruitful concept for public, political and scientific discourses. The problem is rather that often the full meaning of the term is neglected or misunderstood (Becker 2012, 9). Particularly, Becker argues that the *ethical* dimension of sustainability has to be included in order to adequately analyse and approach sustainability issues, such as climate change, the loss of ecosystem services, global justice and economic issues (133). Assuming that meaning is in use, Becker distils a basic meaning of the modern concept 'sustainability' from different usages in political and scientific discourse. This basic meaning consists of three elements.

First, *continuance* refers to the continued existence of a system, entity or process. Scientists traditionally address this aspect of sustainability. However, sustainability is not just about maintaining certain systems or entities. It also has an inherent normative or evaluative element, which Becker calls *orientation*: sustainability is considered to be something positive, something to strive for, a major aim and orientation of long-term human actions (10). Becker points out that the evaluation that the continuance of something is a *good* thing cannot be directly deduced from the idea of continuance itself (11). Rather, the evaluation is that continuance is good for someone or

something. Becker argues that this normative dimension of sustainability is about the relevance of continuance for the so-called *sustainability relations*: fundamental relations human beings necessarily have with other contemporaries, with future generations, and with nature (12). Becker integrates these three elements into one definition of *sustainability*:

Sustainability is the ability to establish *continuance* as a means for *orienting* human actions and life toward the threefold *relatedness* of human existence to contemporaries, future generations, and nature. (14, emphasis added)

2.2 Sustainability ethics: a new field of applied ethics?

In Becker's view, an integrative approach to sustainability ethics has to do justice to the specific normative aspects of the different sustainability relations. According to Becker, this normative dimension of sustainability has been recognised by other authors. However, it has not yet led to a distinct field of sustainability ethics within applied ethics (11). This is necessary according to Becker, because existing normative approaches and traditional ethical theories cannot by themselves fully capture all normative aspects of sustainability. *Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research* can be read as an attempt to set the contours and research agenda of such a new domain of applied ethics. Specifically, Becker shows that the ethics of sustainability is *more* than environmental ethics or an issue of environmental or intergenerational justice, which refer only to a few of the aspects of the sustainability relations. The central normative question of Becker's sustainability ethics is: how ought one to live with regard to one's embedment in the threefold relationship with contemporaries, future generations, and nature? (35). Becker continues to argue that traditional moral frameworks – i.e. utilitarianism and deontology – cannot by themselves fully answer this central question. They are informative with regard to the relations of humans with other contemporaries, but cannot intuitively address the respective relations with future generations or the human-nature relation.

First, the general difficulty with *utilitarian* approaches is the uncertainty of consequences in the relation with future humans (22). What will relevant consequences on the long term be? Although utilitarianism has booked some success with regard to the relation with nature by extending pain and pleasure to animals, it cannot fully grasp all the processes and entities that together make up nature, according to Becker. Second, *deontology* cannot fully grasp the human-nature relationship, because it excludes non-rational beings from the moral community (22). Traditional deontological approaches fundamentally separate rational and non-rational beings, and can therefore not appropriately discuss the ethical dimensions of the threefold relatedness of human beings in an integrative way. Now, Becker's critique here is rather thin, because he does not engage

with more recent deontological approaches that actually include animals (e.g. Regan 2004) or respect for systems or nature (e.g. Taylor 1986). Becker recognises that he handles a (too) strict version of deontology in this respect (24). However, his brief discussion suffices to take the reader along with his exploration of the fruitfulness of *other* normative approaches he considers to be more intuitive in their results: Aristotelean virtue ethics, and ethics of care inspired by feminist philosophy.

2.3 The sustainable person

Virtue ethics sustains a focus on the idea of the virtuous person and her character. Becker here bases his view on a traditional Aristotelean virtue ethical perspective (71). Aristotle had in mind virtues that were crucial for the specific relationships of the ancient polis. In the context of sustainability ethics, Becker is interested in virtues that are specific for the relations of humans with other contemporaries, future generations, and nature. He emphasises that the importance of 'reflected experience' to cultivate these relations (72).

Becker translates the virtuous person in light of his sustainability ethics to the *sustainable person*: '[t]he person who develops a self-identity as a relational person existing in the context of the sustainability relations, as well as specific excellent relational competences and attitudes in regard to each of the three relations' (67). Becker calls this 'encompassing integrated relational identity of the person' the 'main pillar of sustainability ethics'. Here, his critique on the traditional 'three pillars of sustainability' (People, Planet, Profit) shows, redirecting the focus on the cultivation of a virtuous, interdependent, and relational person, with capacities necessary for cultivating excellent sustainability relations (78). It is about the development of a new human identity and self-understanding. This rests on an idea of the human being as an emotional, rational, communicative, and creative being (78-9). This requires the development of a personal identity and excellent attitudes in regard to all sustainability related, through reflected experience and actualisation (79). Also, the person needs to recognise the fundamental meaning and value of the sustainability relations (80).

Now, what kind of virtues and attitudes should the sustainable person cultivate according to Becker? First, with regard to the relation with other contemporaries, Becker focuses on the virtues necessary to cultivate excellent global relationships. Specifically, these relations require of us to deal with differences of concepts and values, and with a sense of otherness. The virtues of *attentiveness* and *receptiveness* to cultural differences are required, and form the prerequisite to develop intercultural virtues such as tolerance and respect (77-8). Second, with regard to the relation with future generations, Becker explores both the necessary virtues for the direct relation with our (grandchildren) and the indirect relation with more distant generations. According to Becker,

especially the parent-child relationship provides us with elementary experience of the dependence and temporality of human existence. The virtues of *attentiveness*, *receptiveness*, *care* and *responsibility* are in place (76). Third, Becker does not understand the human-nature relation as merely instrumental for the good human life. Rather, this relation is a necessary sphere of excellence, that we have to cultivate in order to fully realise our potential as sustainable persons (72). Becker handles a conception of nature that is strongly grounded in Romantic notion of philosophers such as Thoreau, Wordsworth, who understand nature as ‘another self’, stressing both the sameness and otherness. We are necessarily located in this relation, and have to develop the virtues of *attentiveness* and *receptiveness* to cultivate a good relation with nature (75). These basic environmental virtues form the basis for the development of other virtues, such as respect for nature.

Now, according to Becker, ‘sustainability’ entails a fundamental philosophical problem: the issue of the self-identity of the modern individual and the related design modern (western) societies. In its full meaning, sustainability questions the modernist ideal of the human being as an independent, autonomous and rational individual. Becker argues that the modern concept of sustainability entails a paradigm shift, ‘a replacement of the established ideal of the human being as the autonomous and independent individual with a new ideal of the human being as a fundamentally dependent and related being – fundamentally related to contemporaries, future generations, and nature’ (Becker 2012, 2). The identity and self-understanding of the moral subject as a relational, interdependent and virtuous person in the context of sustainability relations requires an encompassing idea of the human being as an emotional, rational, communicative and creative being. Also the notion of rationality has to be reinterpreted in light of Becker’s virtue ethical account, to allow for both theoretical and practical rationality (78-9).

2.4 Meta-structures

Both feminist philosophy and virtue ethics place emphasis on the ethical meaning of relationships and the fundamental embedment of persons in social structures. Social relationships, according to Aristotle, constitute the framework in which a good life and virtues can be realized. Therefore, relations have ethical value (27). Now, moral subjects and their relationships are always embedded in social structures (e.g. the household, the *polis*). These structures, when well formed, make it possible for individuals to cultivate their character and live a good life. Becker calls the historically evolved complex patterns of thought and action in which persons are necessarily embedded ‘meta-structures’.

Meta-structures, according to Becker, are clusters of interrelated basic concepts, basic evaluations, driving forces, and institutionalisations (41). *Basic assumptions* are fundamental

categories of thought by which human beings structure and understand the world (e.g. 'nature' and 'human being'). This includes fundamental distinctions such as the subject-object dichotomy. *Basic evaluations* are often related to the basic assumptions, such as the hierarchical evaluation of subject over object. (41). *Driving forces* are fundamental motivations or mechanisms causing the dynamics of meta-structures, such as the striving for having more (e.g. goods, power, and recognition). Finally, *institutionalisations* encompass the expression, realization, and stabilisation of the first three elements by concrete institutions and organisations (42).

These four elements are complexly interrelated and have a crucial influence on the individual, her thoughts, actions and relationships (43). Becker argues that sustainability relations are developed by the interplay of individual actions and attitudes together with the meta-structures. He demonstrates the fruitfulness of the concept 'meta-structures' by analysing in detail the three most important meta-structures in relation to sustainability: *science*, *technology* and the *economy*. These meta-structures are interrelated and their basic assumptions, evaluations and driving forces work through each other. For example: the striving for more goods parallels the striving for more scientific knowledge, and the more practical application of it (technology). Also, the ideal of independence and autonomy of the individual is the underlying paradigm of modern science, technology, and the modern economy. All three meta-structures support and realize this paradigm. There is also a strong interrelation of two basic assumptions: the modern scientific worldview, with its subject-based theory of knowledge and rationality, and the economic concept of individual rationality. Both are specific expressions of modern European thought and its concepts of the human being and human rationality (58). He takes a special note of one problematic basic assumption for the cultivation of an excellent human-nature relation: the ontological divide between humans and the rest of the world that underpins the modernist view of the human being.

Becker critically examines the existing meta-structures, and argues that they negatively affect the cultivation of sustainable persons. According to him, '[w]e need a systemic ethics that asks what would be a good science, a good technology, a good economy; that is, an ethics that provides ethical guidelines for an appropriate redesign of meta-structures in regard to compatibility and integrations of the structural and individual ethical dimension of sustainability' (96). Becker's conception of ethics, thus, is not just about the individual, but also about the support of individual morality by adequate social institutions and structures. When the social structures are realized ideally, they enable the moral subject to be a good person and to live a good life within them (29). Therefore, sustainability ethics has to be an individual, relational, and systemic ethics. It is a *relational* ethical challenge of how to act and live within the relationships as a threefold-related being. This comprises an *individual* ethical challenge of how each individual ought to live and act in the context of sustainability relations.

And finally, it is a *systemic* ethical challenge of how to properly design societal and global structures that substantially affect the sustainability relations (35).

2.5 Critical notes

This section discusses some potential problems Becker's approach to sustainability ethics. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather focuses on three main issues that are relevant to discuss in the context of the central question of this thesis.

2.5.1 Valuing nature

Becker distils a plausible definition of sustainability (§2.1) that incorporates basic elements of influential definitions that are used in political, scientific, and public discourses. *Continuance* and *orientation* are widely shared meanings of 'sustainability' (e.g. WCED 1987, Elkington 1997, Borland & Lindgreen 2013, Ten Bos & Painter-Morland 2013). However, one can question whether the *relational* dimensions that Becker identifies – with other contemporaries, future generations, and nature – all three have the same necessary and constitutive status. Specifically, it can be argued that sustainability as an orientation is only good or bad *for nature* in so far as it is good *for humans*, i.e. contributes to the good human life.

Becker recognises that the human-nature relationship is *instrumentally* valuable in the sense that relations with other contemporaries and future generations are influenced by human actions that affect nature (12). However, he continues to argue that the relation is also *intrinsically* valuable. Becker stresses that humans are necessarily bounded to their relation with nature, and have to recognise the intrinsic value of the human-nature relationship 'in as far as it entails the fundamental potential for the development of *both human's and nature's excellence*' (72, emphasis added). His definition of nature is 'that area of reality that comes into being and exists independently of human thought and action' (Becker 2012, 68). He defines it in relation to humans, to emphasise both the *sameness* and *otherness* of nature (Ibid). This Romantic conception of nature focuses on the personal encounter with the 'other self' in nature (72). In this view, the consequences of human actions and decisions for the 'self-maintaining ability of nature itself' are morally significant (23). Becker thus conceives this relation from an environmental virtue ethical perspective as a *necessary* relation in which we are embedded, and that we have to cultivate through 'environmental virtues', such as *attentiveness, openness and respect for nature* (70).

Becker's Romantic conception of nature allows him to conceptualise the human-nature relation in such a way that stresses both the necessity of the relation and retains the distinctness of the human being. However, is it not clear in how far this account actually matches the scientific, political, and public discourses. Becker approvingly cites the Brundtland report, that notes: 'In its

broadest sense, the strategy for sustainable development aims to promote harmony among human beings and *between humanity and nature*' (WCED 1987, Ch.2, 81, emphasis added). However, as far as I can see, this definition does not explicitly state that this harmony between humanity and nature is *intrinsically* valuable. Perhaps Becker bases the necessity of the intrinsic value of nature already on the idea of the sustainable person, which requires a Romantic understanding of the human-nature relation that differs from dominant trends in political, scientific, and public discourses.

2.5.2 A conceptual left-over

Related to the previous issue of the status of the human-nature relation in Becker's approach to sustainability ethics, is another potential problem: Becker's account of the subject-object dichotomy. Becker argues that the 'subject-object division in modern philosophy' is a fundamental pattern of thought that defines the human-nature relation and forms a basic assumption that is shared by the different meta-structures (38). According to Becker, the meta-structure *science* is a specific expression of the subject-object dichotomy, constituting a problematic relation between humans and nature (44).

Becker states that this dualism has often been recognised and analysed, for example by the Romantics, German Idealism, Heidegger, and movements such as *deep ecology*. In this context Becker mostly engages with deep ecologists, arguing that even though their holistic approach does do justice to nature as a whole as the subject matter of environmental ethics, they disregards the *difference* between humans and nature in trying to overcome the subject-object dichotomy (25). However, Becker does not elaborate on another possible line of inquiry that moves beyond this modernist assumption. This is a fundamental problem for his account, because the new self-identity of the human being - the encompassing idea of the human being as an emotional, rational, communicative and creative being – requires a self-conception in which freedom and autonomy are interpreted in a non-modern way (78-9). If the basic framework of Becker's sustainability ethics does not *itself* go beyond the modernist metaphysics that ontologically divides humans and the rest of the world, his attempt at developing an integrative sustainability ethics fails.¹ Therefore, Chapter 3 takes up this challenge with the help of Verbeek (2011).

¹ I argue this also elsewhere: Biesiot, M.S. (2014). Book review *Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research* By CHRISTIAN U. BECKER (unpublished). Utrecht University: dep. of Humanities

² The discussion of Verbeek's posthumanist ethical framework in this chapter is in part based on my bachelor thesis: Biesiot, M.S. (2013). Verantwoord verbeteren: over goed leven met *human enhancement* technologieën

2.5.3 The role of companies

Another potential weakness is that Becker's endeavour remains very abstract or theoretical. Lange (2013) correctly stresses that more attention to the application of his conception of sustainability would have added value given the urgent and complex nature of sustainability issues (Lange 2013, 2). Becker does elaborate on the implications of his account for a new, integrative sustainability research. It would be interesting to test his approach further on concrete sustainability issues. Especially relevant for this thesis, Becker fails to provide an integrative account of the role of *companies* in his approach to sustainability ethics.

Now, Becker does critically discuss the meta-structure economy, and gives guidelines to reconsider basic concepts and evaluations in order to align the economy and its institutions with his approach to sustainability ethics (97). Specifically, Becker argues that the ideas of the economic person and economic rationality have to be redefined beyond the 'selfish rational utility' maximising person, towards a 'communicative and creative person who develops and organises economic relationships and creates values within them'. Consequently, also our understanding of business has to be reconsidered: 'business can also be understood as a process of creation of concrete products and competencies for society, as social endeavour of people working together, as management and organization of social structures and common work' (98). Becker states that 'the rise of CSR has already shown that there is an increasing societal demand to integrate business better and in ethical terms into society and has led at least to some changes in the self-identity of corporations and managers' (99).

However, Becker's account here remains abstract. Becker continues to criticise existing approaches of CSR that are based on the triple bottom line approach, stating that this popular framework actually *impedes* an encompassing analysis of the structural aspects of sustainability. The reason is that the focus on the role of the economy for sustainability obscures other crucial structures for sustainability, such as science and technology (37). This focus has led to a misleading description of the whole issue of sustainability as being about how to create harmony among the social, economic and environmental sphere (37). According to Becker, this confuses the sustainability relations with the structures that influence them. For clarity of analysis it is important to distinguish between sustainability relations (by which human existence is fundamentally defined) and structures (which affect these relations) (38). This critique on the triple bottom line approach is shared by other authors (e.g. Hahn et al. 2014).

What is missing in Becker's approach from a business ethics perspective is a more concrete account of the role and moral dimensions of companies in Becker's sustainability ethics. What to expect and what not to expect of companies with regard to sustainability issues? And what is their

proper role with regard to the development of sustainable persons? A line of inquiry that attempts to answer this question is followed up in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3 Ethics of Technology

In the previous chapter, some problems with Becker's approach of sustainability ethics were identified. One of the problems concerned the modernist subject-object dichotomy that, according to Becker, forms one of the basic assumptions that impede an excellent integrative relation with other contemporaries, future generations, and nature. It was argued that a robust sustainability ethics has to go beyond this basic assumption *itself* in order to conceptually support the new self-identity of the human being as a dependent, embodied and embedded being. Becker (2012) fails to do this. Therefore, this chapter takes up the challenge of sketching a normative framework that can found a sustainability ethics that goes beyond the ontological distinction between humans and the rest of the world. Since the philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek (2011) already has developed such an approach in the field of the ethics of technology, this chapter discusses his so-called *posthumanist ethics*.² This means a move towards the field of the ethics of technology (the 'T' of the BEST approach) for insights.

Now, the *ethics of technology* and *sustainability* are actually no strange bedfellows. To begin with, sustainability issues are directly and indirectly related to modern technologies, e.g. climate change, accidents with 'mega-technologies' such as oil tankers, eco-terrorism (Ihde 1993). The transformative powers and impact of technologies in today's societies are immense, which is also recognised by Becker (2012), who stresses the important role of technology in co-shaping sustainability relations. This is in line with the 'third wave' of philosophers of technology (i.e. Ihde, Latour), which pointed out the various social, political, ethical, and cultural dimensions of technologies in human societies. Technologies, they argue, are not neutral instruments, but

² The discussion of Verbeek's posthumanist ethical framework in this chapter is in part based on my bachelor thesis: Biesiot, M.S. (2013). *Verantwoord verbeteren: over goed leven met human enhancement technologieën* (unpublished). University of Groningen: dep. of Philosophy

fundamentally influence human practices and experiences. Moreover, Verbeek argues, humans and technologies actually *constitute* each other.

3.1 Moving beyond a humanist ethics

In today's (western) societies, the dominant answer to the question 'What does it mean to be human?' is *humanist*. Humanism understands the human being as an autonomous and rational subject that uses technologies as means to her own ends. The world 'outside' is the stage against which the human being acts, and which supplies her with the natural resources necessary to reach her goals. In this anthropocentric worldview, with its roots in the Enlightenment, the human being has become 'the measure of all things' (Harbers & Verbeek 2006, 5). Behind this humanist view on the human being lies a modernist metaphysics, which constitutes the modern subject through an *a priori* ontological divide of humans and the rest of the world (e.g. Verbeek 2006; 2011). This ontological subject-object dichotomy forms the basis for the implicit hierarchical opposition of 'culture' versus 'nature', and 'human' versus 'non-human'. In this view, *active, intentional, and autonomous* humans differ ontologically from the *passive and instrumental* technological artefacts. Verbeek argues that the modernist subject-object dichotomy is problematic, because it obscures the ever more interwoven character of humans and technologies in today's societies (Verbeek 2011, 45).

Verbeek argues that humans are in fact technologically mediated beings. This means that 'humans' and 'technologies' cannot *be nor be understood* separate from each other. We would not be the persons we are today without our relation to smartphones, cars, and antibiotics. Arguably, technologies have a significant moral dimension, by contributing to the design of practices and interpretations on the basis of which humans make moral decisions. This moral dimension, however, cannot fully be grasped in the traditional humanist ethics of technology. Therefore, Verbeek develops a non-humanist ethical approach: a *posthumanist* ethics. Verbeek's posthumanist ethical framework answers the question 'What does it mean to be human?' from a non-humanist. In order to do so, Verbeek develops a non-modernist vocabulary, from within which he reinterprets the humanist notion of agency and the moral subject and object in a way that does justice to the mediating role of technologies in the lives, practices, choices, and experiences of humans.

Before discussing in detail what this posthumanist framework look like, two possible misunderstandings are first addressed. First, posthumanism is sometimes confused with transhumanism (e.g. Kunneman 2006). Both transhumanism and posthumanism can be understood as a new turn in humanism critique, inspired by new technological and scientific developments. Harbers & Verbeek (2006) make an illuminating conceptual distinction by interpreting transhumanism as the movement towards the *factual* transformation of the human being. Where

transhumanists desire to go beyond the human(e), Harbers & Verbeek understand posthumanism as an attempt to *think* beyond humanism. Posthumanism is not a vision on the 'post-human', but a framework of philosophical, social, and political thinking that critically relates to humanism.

Second, humanism critique is a controversial philosophical endeavour (e.g. Sloterdijk's *Rules for the human park 1999*). Critical remarks on humanism are sometimes interpreted as inhumane perspectives, hostile to the humanist values that characterise western modern societies. According to Verbeek (2006), however, critique on humanism is not necessarily a threat to values as self-determination, integrity, and responsibility when the critique is pointed at the humanist *metaphysics* behind the existing ethics (Verbeek 2006).

3.2 Moral mediation

Verbeek approaches the idea of technological mediation from a *postphenomenological* perspective. He builds on Ihde's postphenomenological analysis of how technologies mediate the relations between human beings and the world. According to Verbeek, technologies play all sorts of roles in the actions, practices, perceptions and interpretations on the basis of which humans make moral decisions (Verbeek 2011, 54). By contributing to the design of our morality technologies have a significant moral dimension, Verbeek argues. He calls this *moral mediation* (50). By interpreting technology as moral mediator, the postphenomenological approach of technological mediation gets a normative dimension (53). To make plausible that technological mediation exists, and to develop a non-modern vocabulary to express this reality, Verbeek builds further on some ideas of Ihde and Latour.

With reference to Ihde, Verbeek states that technological artefacts mediate our perceptions through their 'technological intentionality': the specific orientation of technology in organising perception. For example: when you look through an infra-red camera at a tree, the camera makes new aspects of reality visible (it shows whether the tree is healthy) and conceals things that humans can see with the naked eye (9).

Technological artefacts also mediate our actions. According to Latour, artefacts have a 'script' that prescribes how humans should act when using the artefacts. For example: the script of a speed bump is 'slow down when approaching me' (10). By suggesting how to act, scripts have moral influence. The resulting action programme depends on the relations with humans in different contexts of use. When humans and non-humans (the non-modern term coined by Latour for 'objects', i.e. artefacts) become connected and configured, a 'translation' takes place of their individual action programmes into a new composite agent with a new action programme (11).

Verbeek continues to argue that technology is a mediator and not an *intermediary*, because technological mediation always results in a translation of action and a transformation of perception (8). An intermediary can be understood in instrumental terms: it is a means to an end that does not add anything itself in the process. A mediator, however, actively participates by shaping reality and creating new goals (46). Mediations always have an unpredictable character: unforeseen relations can come into existence with unforeseen moral dimensions (e.g. speed bumps that invite skaters to do dangerous tricks, which does not enhance the safety on the road). The concept of mediator does justice to the active, moral role and the relational character of technologies.

Moral mediation implies a form of technological agency: technologies 'do' something. They translate 'our' action programmes. Verbeek argues that this agency should be understood as a hybrid form of agency, distributed over specific associations of humans and non-humans that act together (53). Technologies are not moral agent themselves, but have agency in relation with humans; and both can only be understood in relation to each other. Humans come to being in relation to non-humans: technology helps to constitute people in specific networks and so in part define the moral character of actions and choices (46). In order to understand the moral importance of technology a new approach to agency is necessary within ethical theory. In order to do so, Verbeek reinterprets the traditional humanist conditions for moral agency: intentionality and freedom.

3.3 Hybrid intentionality

As noted before, Intentionality refers both to the ability of forming intentions and being direct at the world. In both senses, Verbeek argues, intentionality has a hybrid character (55). As shown above, Verbeek uses Ihde's postphenomenological analyses of the relations between humans and technologies to show that the directedness of humans to the world often has a technological character. Also, human intentions to do something are always formed in relation to the world, a world that is characterised by relations with technologies. However, technological intentionality does not exist without human intentionality, but rather forms an element of hybrid intentionality. An example is the way an ultrasound helps to create a situation of choice on the basis of her directedness at the world, by depicting an unborn child in terms of the chances at genetic disorder. The resulting choice is not of 'autonomous' parents, but is made by the 'parent-ultrasound' association. Without technology, there would not be a situation of choice or the choice would be made on the basis of a different relation to the situation (58). In Verbeek's non-humanist approach, technological artefacts are active and have an intentional dimension – they 'do' something. What about freedom?

3.4 Freedom as self-constitution

To answer this question, Verbeek reinterprets the humanist notion of freedom as *autonomy*, which, according to him, presupposes a form of sovereignty with regard to technology that people simply do not have. The situated and mediated character of our daily lives renders it practically impossible to make freedom in the humanist sense an absolute criterion for moral agency. Rather, the necessary freedom, according to Verbeek, is the freedom to relate to technological mediation. Building on Foucault's work, Verbeek argues that freedom does not exist in being free from (technological) influences or powers, but in the ability to relate to the influences. This freedom can be applied to artefacts in the sense that freedom is a characteristic of human-technology associations (60). Technology therefore has a morally significant kind of agency.

Besides reinterpreting the moral *object*, Verbeek also reinterprets the moral *subject* in ethical theory. Against the modern, enlightened image of the autonomous, moral subject he places a non-modern, heteronomous subjects that is closely connected to her material surroundings (22). This non-modern moral subject is heteronomous, because her intentions are not autonomous, but the result of power structures in which subjects are necessarily embedded. According to Verbeek, in our time, the objects and power relations to which subjects relate are primarily of technological nature: '[B]y mediating our actions and perceptions, technologies form a structure of power, disciplining, organizing and normalizing the subject' (70).

Ethics, according to Verbeek, is about the development of a good relationship to these mediations and designing our moral subjectivity in relation to the mediations (81). With this, Verbeek goes back to the ethics of the Greek antiquity – which is per definition non-modern – in which 'technologies of the self' (75) play a central role. Technologies of the self are ways to experiment and shape the relation to inevitable influences. This makes freedom an activity: a practice of moral self-constitution (81). The goal of ethics then is no longer the protection of humans against technologies, but 'carefully assessing and experimenting with technological mediations, in order to explicitly fashion the ways in which they help to shape subjects in our technological society' (82). Technologies of the self evolve around the question: what kind of mediated subject do I want to be? It is about explicitly shaping the technologically mediated subjectivity. This makes the mediated subject responsible for the form the mediated subjectivity takes (87). The mediated choices that subjects make are *moral* choices, because mediating technologies leave enough room to develop a free relation to them.

3.5 A posthumanist sustainability ethics

The discussion of Verbeek's posthumanist ethical approach in this chapter shows that it is conceptually possible to develop an ethics that goes beyond the modernist ontological distinction between humans and the rest of the world. This was a necessary supplement to Becker's sustainability ethics. Now, Verbeek's account only applies if there is 'space' between persons and the structures or influences they necessarily relate to. Self-practices (technologies of the self) require some amount of freedom, because '*relating to*' presupposes a conceptual distance and distinction between the person and the influence the person relates to. This also applies to technological *mediation*: cultivating a responsible relation to the technologies that mediate our actions and decisions requires that these technologies do not fully coincide with us. Thus, a prerequisite from Verbeek's posthumanist perspective with regard to Becker's approach to sustainability ethics is that the sustainable person should be *free* to develop an excellent relationship to the mediations and meta-structures that influence her.

However, can Verbeek's interpretations of freedom, intentionality, and self-practices be directly transposed to Becker's account of sustainability ethics? The answer is: not directly. Grounding Becker's approach on a posthumanist ethics requires an intimate investigation of the basic concepts Becker uses in order to translate them – where necessary – into a non-modernist vocabulary. Since Becker does not make explicit in *Sustainability Ethics and Sustainability Research* what his theory of (moral) agency is, this translation requires conceptual work. There are, however, some important similarities between the works of Becker (2012) and Verbeek (2011) that indicate that this work may turn out to be very fruitful.

First, Verbeek's idea of the human being as a mediated and relational being, embedded and interwoven with her surroundings, resembles Becker's account. They both stress the mediating character of technologies in fundamental relationships. Also, they both explicitly try to replace the modernist idea of the rational and autonomous human being. In this sense, Verbeek might be understood as supplementing and sustaining Becker's ideal of sustainable identity. Second, Verbeek and Becker both ground their approach on a virtue-based normative framework that focuses on the development of excellent relations and design of the moral subjectivity in relation to influences and structures persons are necessarily embedded in. Here, the similarities are striking. Verbeek's focus is on the mediated nature of the relation between humans and their life world. In Becker's case, the focus is on the mediated nature of the relations between humans, future generations, and nature.

In sum, Verbeek and Becker share similar views on the human being and her character, the ethical importance of relations, and the importance of the ethical question of the good life. This

suggests that is plausible that Verbeek's posthumanist ethical framework could ground Becker's sustainability ethics.

Chapter 4 Back to Business Ethics

In Chapter 2, two main problems with Becker's approach to sustainability ethics were identified. First, the lack of integration of moral concepts that goes beyond the subject-object dichotomy into Becker's normative framework, and second, the lack of an integrative account of the role of companies in sustainability ethics. The previous chapter addressed the first problem, discussing the merits of a *posthumanist ethical framework*, developed in the field of the ethics of technology, in order to move beyond the modernist ontological division between human and the rest of the world. This chapter examines the second problem: what could be the role of companies in Becker's approach to sustainability ethics? This line of inquiry takes us 'back' in the BEST approach to the field of business ethics (the 'B' of the BEST approach) in order to supplement Becker's account.

As discussed in Chapter 1, traditionally companies 'do' sustainability through their CSR programmes. Often, CSR is coupled to external stakeholders. This relates to the idea of the company as a *moral agent* that can be held responsible for the consequences of her actions in the world (e.g. Kaptein & Wempe 2002, Dubbink & Van Liederkerk 2009). This role of the company as a moral agent is an important starting point for rethinking CSR in Becker's approach to sustainability ethics. The main part of this chapter, however, is dedicated to another role of a company in Becker's sustainability ethics that is not always explicit in discussions about corporate responsibility with regard to sustainability issues. This role concerns the company as a *collective of persons*.

4.1 The company as a collective of sustainable persons

Companies can be understood as distinct collectives of individuals. Solomon (1992) offers an illuminating virtue-based account of this collective nature of firms. He compares organisations to Aristotelean communities, and argues that they are therefore the perfect place to think about virtues. Central to Solomon's *Aristotelean Approach to Business* is the idea that good corporate behaviour follows from individual virtue and integrity. Human beings, Solomon stresses, are social creatures that form their identities in interaction with the community they are part of (Solomon 1992, 338). Therefore, the cultivation of character and accompanying virtues should have a central role in business practices. Solomon identifies some important virtues in corporate life, which are part of the general virtues of human social life: honesty, loyalty, courage, amiability, prudence, resourcefulness,

and tactfulness (330). What is important for these business virtues is their place in a productive meaningful and fulfilling life in business. This, in Solomon's words,

does not simply mean, 'how does it contribute to the bottom line' but rather, 'does it contribute to the social harmony of the organization? Does it manifest the best ideals of the organization? Does it render an employee or manager 'whole' or does it tear a person to pieces, walling off one aspect of a personality from another and leaving one part to apologize or feel ashamed before the other?' (332)

Becker explicitly agrees with Solomon (1992) that the development of specific business virtues is necessary for the development of an economic person (98). However, the notion of an *economic person* remains a rather abstract concept in Becker's approach, linked to economic theory and rationality. More illuminating here is a point that Becker (2012) makes when he discusses the implications of his account for academic research. The new type of 'sustainability research' that Becker proposes has as its goal 'the proper development of science as a structure that supports the constitution and governance of the sustainability relations in an excellent way' (Becker 2012, 125). This requires of a researcher specific cognitive capabilities and personal ethical competences that allow her to actually practice new basic evaluations of sustainability research, e.g. with regard to the subject-object dichotomy. In Becker's view, this means that the researcher has to develop an identity *as a sustainable person*, and embed her identity *as a researcher* in this new self-understanding (Ibid). Since individual researchers are part of the collective practice of science, Becker's requirement of the embedment of their identity into the encompassing identity of the sustainable person can be transposed to the business context. With reference to both Solomon and Becker, a meaningful life in business would mean being a 'whole' person, someone who does not have to 'wall off' her identity as a *businessperson* from her identity as a *sustainable person*. Thus, in Becker's approach, companies can be understood as communities where individuals are striving to integrate their professional identity into their development as a sustainable person.

This account of the integration of identities and 'wholeness' resembles the idea of *integrity*. Integrity is a concept that has become increasingly important in business ethics since the 1990s (Kaptein & Wempe 2002, 152; Jeurissen 2003, 48). The question that arises is whether the *sustainable person* is just one practical identity among others identities (such as a business person, a sister, a citizen, etc.) that the person of integrity has to bring together, or whether it is a special kind of 'encompassing identity' as Becker seems to suggest. The next section discusses an interpretation of integrity defended by Korsgaard (2009) that can shed some light on this question. Korsgaard is not a business ethicist, but her account provides a fruitful account of integrity that goes beyond the idea of professional integrity.

4.2 Self-constitution

Korsgaard argues that 'integrity' is connected to *self-constitution*. Human beings cannot help but to act and to make choices, and in doing so constitute themselves as specific persons (Korsgaard 2009, 26). The formation of a personal or practical identity – 'a description under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking' (Korsgaard 2009, 20) – is therefore necessarily connected with being a human (214). Your personal identity, the specific person you are, is formed in the choices you make and the things you do. But you can only make yourself into a specific person if you have integrity: if you are consistent and whole (214).

To get an action ascribed to as *your* action, it has to be an expression of yourself as a whole, and not the result of some force working in or on you (18). Your choices and actions therefore have to be based on universal principles: in the future you should act in the same situation in the same manner, unless you have good reasons not to do so. If these principles were not here, there is no consistency and coherence in your actions and your self, and you *cannot* act (199). This is, according to Korsgaard, an on-going struggle: '*the ongoing struggle for integrity, the struggle for psychic unity, the struggle to be, in the face of psychic complexity, a single unified agent (...) The work of achieving psychic unity, the work that we experience as necessitation, is what I am going to call self-constitution.*' (7). The actions of a person are necessarily an expression of her *as a whole*, because she has to put herself in unity behind her actions and decisions to be able to act at all. This makes integrity a constitutive principle for moral agency and being a person (e.g. 176; 180; 214).

Thus, someone *without* integrity cannot put herself fully and in unity behind her actions; she cannot act moral, because she is a bad person or does bad things. In both cases she is bad *at being a person* (180). From this it follows that the representative of a company, who fails to embed her identity as a businessperson with that of herself as a sustainable person, not only fails at being a *person of integrity*, but also fails at being a *person*. Now, this sheds light on what is necessary to become a sustainable person: you constitute yourself as a sustainable person through your actions and decisions. And in order for you to act or decide at all – as a person – *you* have to pull *yourself* together. This personal imperative again points at a kind of self-practices of the sustainable person (§3.4). I would say that in Becker's approach to sustainability ethics, a sustainable person necessarily is also a person with integrity. It is a person with integrity that manages to integrate her practical identities with that of the sustainable person. The special status of the identity of the sustainable person with regard to other identities is that it is a *necessary* component of the sustainable person. Different sustainable person may have different practical identities that they need to unite, but they

all need to integrate their self-understanding as an interdependent, embedded, and relational being into everything they do and decide.

Further, this means that the company as an association of individuals can, in Becker's sustainability ethics, be ideally understood as *a collective of sustainable persons with integrity*. Now, within the company as a kind of *polis*, individuals are related to each other and are influenced by its structures. In Becker's sustainability ethics, the relations and structures of a company should be designed in such a way that they allow for the individuals within them to develop themselves as sustainable persons, i.e. to develop 'a self-identity as a relational person existing in the context of sustainability relations, as well as specific excellent relational competences and attitudes in regard to each of the three relations' (Becker 2012, 67). This organisational design should allow or stimulate the representatives of the company to cultivate sustainability virtues (such as *attentiveness, receptiveness, care, and respect*), and business virtues (such as *honesty, courage, amiability, prudence, resourcefulness, and tactfulness*). But first and foremost, the representatives of a company need to be able to be *persons with integrity*. They should be able to put themselves as a unity behind their actions and decisions. This means that they should be able to develop or maintain a self-understanding within the relations and structures of the company as an interdependent, embedded, and relational being.

These requirements, flowing from supplementing Becker's sustainability ethics with the thinking of Solomon (1992) and Korsgaard (2009), still remain too vague to pinpoint *how* a company could fulfil such a role. The next section discusses the concept of 'corporate practices' in order to give more substance to this.

4.3 Corporate practices

Companies are both formally and informally organised. First, the *corporate structure* is the formal dimension of a company, and concerns the function that persons or groups of persons fulfil in a company (Kaptein & Wempe 2002, 148). The corporate structure concerns the distribution of tasks and responsibilities, the rules and procedures, and the specific decision-making structures of a company (Ibid). Second, the informal corporate *culture* 'concerns the way of thinking, feeling, and doing unique to the corporation' (Ibid). These customs and expectations can be intentionally used to motivate and stimulate employees with the aim of achieving specific corporate goals (149).

According to Kaptein & Wempe (2002), the culture and structure of a company together form so-called *corporate practices* (Ibid). A corporate practice is a more or less stable and coherent pattern of corporate expressions that can guide employees and managers:

[P]ractices include the tasks, responsibilities and procedures, relationships, norms and values, etc. that are *actually* expressed in the actions of organisational members. (...) These practices form the grounds upon which a corporation can be regarded as a moral entity. This concerns the conditions, rules, habits, the ingrained customs, incentives, and stimuli that structure individual actions and that become visible in individual actions. The object of evaluation is not incidental actions, but rather the context that compels, stimulates, or tempts people to act. It is precisely this organizational context that is susceptible to change. (146)

So, Kaptein & Wempe argue that the company can be understood as a moral entity through the cohesive notion of corporate practices (150). Corporations are autonomous in the sense that they are orientated towards objectives and act accordingly. *They* make choices and decisions, and can therefore be addressed as a company and a moral subject (151).³ Kaptein & Wempe emphasise in their virtue-based approach not only the moral dimensions of corporate action, but of the representatives of a company. Here, the framework in which action occurs – the ‘organisational context that compels, stimulates or tempts people to act’ (146) – is of central importance, because it provides unity and directs the representatives (137). Kaptein & Wempe argue that corporations may be considered responsible for the outcomes of their practices inasmuch as they have the capacity to change these practices.

Thus, the specific corporate practices of a company form its moral identity and can guide its representatives to act in certain ways. Therefore, corporate practices are a fruitful starting point to better understand the role of companies in Becker’s approach to sustainability ethics. This is in line with Becker’s idea that sustainability ethics is about the mutual supportive development of individual morality and organisational framework. In the previous section it was argued that companies should be designed in such a way that their representatives can develop or maintain a self-understanding within the relations and structures of the company as an interdependent, embedded, and relational being. The representatives of the company should be able to be persons with integrity, and to cultivate virtues (such as *attentiveness, receptiveness, care, respect, honesty, courage, amiability, resourcefulness, and tactfulness*). In order to achieve this, corporate practices should be aligned with Becker’s approach to sustainability ethics.

A development of corporate practices that together can form the cohesive identity of a *sustainable company* requires the fundamental rethinking of the way companies do business and the way they are organised. As a starting point for further reflection, here, two ‘sustainability enhancing

³ Note that here the two roles of companies in Becker’s approach to sustainability ethics come together: the company as a moral agent and as a collective of individuals. In fact, they can only be adequately understood in relation to each other. However, they are addressed separately in this thesis for the sake of bringing attention to the role of the company as a collective of sustainable persons.

corporate practices' are presented that are in line with Becker's approach to sustainability ethics. These measures are based on the integrity management process that Kaptein & Wempe describe (264).

First, *sustainable role models*. The management of a company, or other designated representatives, can fulfil the function of a role model (263). From a virtue-ethical perspective, the function of role models or *exemplars* is crucial. The reason for this is that in virtue ethics an action is considered to be right or wrong because of what the virtuous agent does or does not do (Timmons 2013, 279). Role models therefore are the embodied answer to the questions of how to live and how to act in a specific situation. Sustainable role models can stimulate employees to develop the virtues and attitudes of the sustainable person through their actions and decisions in the face of recognisable dilemmas.

Second, a *code of sustainability ethics*. According to Kaptein & Wempe, a code is a means to get grip on implementing change in a company (263). It includes the specification of a company's responsibilities, principles, and virtues (263). Kaptein & Wempe state that a code of ethics offers concrete guidance with regard to dilemmas that employees and managers might encounter. For example by prioritising stakeholders. A *virtues statement* on the other hand grants representatives of a company more flexibility in translating values in the context of a given dilemma (272). A *code of sustainability ethics* is a form of a code of ethics in which a balance is realised between the freedom necessary to actualise self-practices and cultivate virtues, and the guidance necessary to direct cohesive change.

4.4 Critical note

In this chapter, perhaps more than in previous ones, the difficulties with bringing together different theories of different fields of applied ethics and philosophy become poignant. Specifically, is not Korsgaard's view on autonomy incompatible with Verbeek's account of the heteronomous moral subject and Becker's perspective on the dependent self-identity of sustainable persons?

Korsgaard is a Kantian scholar, who brings together Kantian and Aristotelean philosophy on the level of action theory in *Self-constitution* (2009). Her conception of principles is Kantian, her understanding of the necessity of self-constitution is Aristotelean. She argues that people have to self-determine their actions and choices as acts and choices of *them*. The person with integrity, in Korsgaard's account, needs to be the one that acts. She cannot act moral if *she* is not efficacious. Therefore, she has to be autonomous, and not heteronomous. This notion of self-determination seems to oppose the idea of hybrid agency of Verbeek (2011) and the self-identity as a dependent human being of Becker (2012).

Verbeek shows that this 'autonomous' person at the core of humanist ethics does not actually exist, and Becker shows that it cannot be the self-identity of the sustainable person. However, even though Korsgaard's notion of self-determination is thoroughly humanist in nature, there is conceptual space to relate the different philosophical approaches through the notion of freedom. In Verbeek's and Becker's frameworks it is still meaningful to speak of 'humans' and 'non-humans' or of 'humans' and 'nature', i.e. to understand the human being as a distinct person. Verbeek does not argue for fully heteronomous idea of human agency, because his normative approach actually fails when this happens. The reason is that there still needs to be a distinction between humans and nonhumans to *form* a composite agent, and to be able to *relate* to the action and the world in which is acted. Without such space to relate, humans are not free. Reinterpreting autonomy as freedom in such as way is a thinner than the conception of autonomy that Korsgaard argues for. However, it is a starting point from which a conceptual basis can be explored.

Chapter 5 Harvesting

This final chapter harvests what cross-fertilising the different fields business ethics, sustainability ethics, and the ethics of technology so far has yielded. After a brief summary of the explorative journey in this thesis, the central question of this thesis is answered: what would be the added value if academic and professional business ethicists integrate the ethical dimensions of sustainability in their approach to sustainability issues? Specifically, some implications of the conceptual and ethical work done for both professional and academic business ethicists are discussed. In conclusion, the merits of the BEST approach are evaluated.

5.1 The yield

Although the flexible nature of the concept *sustainability* has allowed various stakeholders to adapt the concept to their own purposes, its conceptual ambiguity hinders the academic debate and the implementation of sustainability measures by companies. This is problematic, because sustainability issues require urgent action. This thesis explored what the added value would be if academic and professional business ethicists integrate the ethical dimensions of sustainability in their approach to sustainability issues. In Chapter 1 I showed that existing approaches in academic business ethics generally do not critically examine the meaning of sustainability in an integrative way. Also, the focus on turning the ambiguous concept *sustainability* into something that companies can implement obscures some fundamental questions about the ways companies do business. Therefore, I proposed to use a new type of methodology called ‘the BEST approach’, connecting approaches in business ethics (‘BE’), sustainability ethics (‘S’), and the ethics of technology (‘T’).

According to Becker (2012), the full meaning of sustainability is ‘the ability to establish *continuance* as a means for *orienting* human actions and life toward the threefold *relatedness* of human existence to contemporaries, future generations, and nature’ (Becker 2012, 14; *emphasis added*). Therefore, a sustainability ethics has to make sense of the different moral relationships of human beings. Not only is sustainability ethics an individual moral challenge of developing excellent *sustainability relations* and a self-identity as a relational and interdependent being, it also is a systemic challenge of the good (re)design of societal structures in which *sustainable persons* can develop themselves. Although Becker provides an interpretation of sustainability that fosters the adequate analysis and approach of sustainability issues, I identified two potential problems with his account: first, the lack of integration of moral concepts that go beyond the subject-object dichotomy

into Becker's normative framework, and second, the lack of an integrative account of the role of companies in Becker's sustainability ethics. These are crucial shortcomings in developing an encompassing sustainability ethics that can inform business ethics. Therefore Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 discussed possible therapies.

Chapter 3 explored how Becker's sustainability ethics can go beyond the modernist subject-object dichotomy. One plausible answer lies in the normative approach that Verbeek (2011) has developed in the context of the philosophy of technology. It is argued that Verbeek's *posthumanist* ethics provides a fruitful approach, in which the self-identity of the human being as a related, mediated, and interdependent being can be systematically embedded in Becker's ethical framework.

In Chapter 4, it was argued that the role of companies in sustainability ethics is two-fold: by being a moral agent, and by being a collective of persons. The main part of the chapter discussed the latter role, which is not often discussed in business ethics with regard to sustainability. A discussion of Korsgaard's view on integrity shows that *CSR* and *integrity*, traditionally the 'outward' and 'inward' looking parts of business ethics, are actually two ways of 'doing' *sustainability*. In this way, therapies for non-*sustainability* and non-*integrity* actually come together in professional business ethics. This means that sustainability is not just about respecting the planetary boundaries by reducing carbon emissions and recycling waste, but also about the design of corporate practices in which employees can develop the (moral) competences and virtues of the *sustainable* person.

The next two sections explicitly address some important added values of professional and academic business ethicists integrating the ethical dimensions of sustainability in their respective approach to sustainability issues.

5.1.1 Added value for professional business ethicists

For professional business ethicists, the BEST approach provides a clear and integrative interpretation of sustainability that is both deep and communicable. This understanding of sustainability focuses on a role of companies that is not standardly connected to sustainability in business ethics: the company as a *collective of sustainable persons*. This perspective allows business ethicists to develop new ways of 'doing' sustainability, e.g. through sustainable corporate practices, such as *sustainable role models* and a *code of sustainability ethics* (§4.3). The challenge for professional business ethicists here lies in the development of such sustainable corporate practices. Also, they can use the BEST approach to develop new ideas about corporate responsibility that are in line with an integrative sustainability ethics. This can be guided by ideas about the fundamental relations with other contemporaries, future generations, and nature, as well as the focus on both internal and external stakeholders. By

learning from practice, professional business ethicists will prove invaluable in collaborating with academic business ethicists and other scholars to make the BEST approach more robust.

5.1.2 Added value for academic business ethicists

Through the BEST approach, a clear conception of *sustainability* and an analytical framework in which sustainability issues can be adequately analysed and approached is brought to the field of academic business ethics. In my opinion, the most important added value of lies in *new questions* that arise from the cross-fertilisation of different fields of applied ethics. Here, three sets of such questions are posed.

First, *Can we develop a conceptualisation of corporate responsibility that fits in Becker's approach to sustainability ethics?* As noted in Chapter 1, corporate (social) responsibility is also a concept in disarray. Becker's approach can guide further exploration of the meaning of corporate responsibility in a sustainability ethics. Some related questions are: *How can Becker's critique on the triple bottom line approach be challenged from a business ethical perspective? How can the ideal of the sustainable company be reconciled with actual ambition levels of actual companies?* And also, *Can the notion of 'hybrid intentionality' and the attribution of morality to 'associations of humans and non-humans' be transposed from the philosophy of technology to companies?* This might be a fruitful perspective on the moral agency of companies that illuminates new aspects of corporate morality.

Second, *How do sustainability and integrity relate within a business context? Can Korsgaard's view on integrity be fully integrated with an enhanced 'posthumanist sustainability ethics'?* But also more concretely: *how can this be translated to organisational design? Can the concept of 'self-practices' inform the development of new corporate practices?* Chapter 4 of this thesis can serve as a starting point to develop new indicators and adapt existing corporate practices, directed at the development of virtues and attitudes necessary for the development of sustainable persons. Here, of course, academic and professional business ethics are intimately connected.

Third, *How can we collaborate more with other fields of applied ethics?* The merit of the BEST approach is that it shows that integrating ideas, concepts, and approaches from different fields of applied ethics is enriching: it leads to new perspectives and questions. This point in fact transcends the domain of applied ethics or philosophy, and applies to other scientific disciplines as well. Collaborating more with other scientific practices and forms of knowledge might require some competences and attitudes to be more cultivated, for example communicative skills and an openness to other perspectives. Putting this in the context of the encompassing sustainability research that

Becker argues for, it can be asked *What is the role of the university and of the education system in general in general with regard to the development of sustainable persons?*

5.2 Final remarks

One might wonder whether this thesis in the field of applied ethics is in fact ‘applied’ enough, since the emphasis lies more on conceptual alignment than on application and implementation. Would not the BEST approach be more successful if it could actually prescribe in more concrete terms *how to become a sustainable person* and *how to build sustainable companies*? My answer to this can be short: the questions ‘how to become a sustainable person’ and ‘how to build sustainable companies’ are made intelligible in this context *by virtue of* the BEST approach. To me, this proves both its success as an approach and its fruitfulness as a starting point for further collaborations. The BEST approach is not finished or exhaustive. Rather, it is an on-going process, generating more questions that can be explored with new approaches of different fields of applied ethics and other scientific disciplines.

As a closing remark I would like to bring your attention to the image on the front page of this thesis. The picture expresses both the interdependent, related and embodied nature of being human, and the flourishing as a distinct person. To me, it is about connecting, and turning yourself around to experience things in a new light. As such, it depicts both the BEST approach of this thesis, as what the ethical dimension of sustainability requires from us as persons. It points to the fact that we have to integrate sustainability in our bones. That is, *if* we embrace it as a worthwhile orientation of human life, because sustainability is but *one* answer to the question ‘What kind of person do I want to be, and in what kind of world do I want to live?’.

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