Our Sustainable Human Existence

Our Sustainable Human Existence:

Sustainocracy and 30 Years of Shared Responsibility Research

By

Jean-Paul Close

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Sustainocracy:

Our sustainable existence is a shared responsibility.

"The responsibility for our sustainable existence cannot be delegated or purchased. We all carry it, individually and together."
(Sustainocracy)

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FOREWORD

For over 30 years I have been researching for myself how we can convert the degenerative path of potential self-destruction that we currently follow as humankind and our societies into one of sustainable development.

Due to personal circumstances and choices in my own life, I developed the concept of sustainability from a collective human-centred, existentialist point of view. This was fundamentally different from the way sustainability was being addressed at institutional level and in societal human behaviour. These levels concentrated more on the availability of planetary resources for our political and financial interests. My attention focused on what would be needed to assure the long-term existence of humankind. I started to look at what we are as a biological human entity, how we learn, what motivates us, how we become aware, what the possible core natural values are of our sustainable existence, etc.

Both approaches to sustainability and societal development represented different dimensions of thought and handling. The externalised approach to sustainability of society and the internalised version of myself could be interpreted as yin-yang, opposite energies that can either be conflictive or complementary to each other. To become complementary, both dimensions needed to recognise each other first and then develop their interaction on the basis of equality and a common existential purpose.

Most of the existential problems, crises and instability in the world can be attributed to the current disconnection between the two.

It became my personal challenge to pioneer the ideology of interconnecting these views on our sustainable perspectives for integral durable wellness and the sustainable continuity of humankind. In order to avoid confusion about my own interpretation of sustainability, I needed a word that reflected its intentions. This became Sustainocracy, a composite of two fields of interaction: *Sustainable human development and a real-time democracy.*

The book describes not only the progress I made but also the struggles, the tension, the opposition and support while interacting with governments, business entities, citizens, education and science. The book is not meant to be just a scientific analysis or reference. It is an empirical experience, a process of thought and action that hopefully finds its way into the

world by showing its existence, functioning and potential results. It equally introduces useful instruments and ways to help implement a new level, level four, of regional development for the benefit of all involved.

With my work and this publication, I hope to contribute in a positive way to the evolution of humankind. I do this by introducing the next step, not by demolishing what we have achieved so far, but by providing a new mental and behavioural context that opens up many meaningful and inspirational opportunities for all people and institutions that are willing to engage.

—Jean-Paul Close

Founder of Sustainocracy

Author and researcher.

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, we are hardly aware of that responsibility, busy as we are sustaining ourselves in a day-to-day reality that we have created over time. Meanwhile, humankind as a whole is experiencing the degenerative and destructive potential of self-elimination due to our current dominant and generalised parasitic, materialistic behaviour. This has built up and systematised itself for centuries, even thousands of years. It has structured and normalised itself to such an extent that it has become nearly impossible to imagine a different approach to human reality. We seem to be entirely captured by a particular way of behaving, in all current expressions of humankind. Until it is too late.

But what if we do imagine something else?

Redesigning the human ecosystem is not only a natural and necessary phenomenon of choice, but it is also the key to our own potential survival against ourselves and our systematised abuse. We may even find that humankind is on the verge of an irrevocable evolutionary step towards existential, behavioural and societal maturity. But who is the one to be taking that step first? Where to start?

Many people in the world will agree that important changes of some sort are needed. But the psychology of change is complex, especially if it confronts us with our most trusted behavioural patterns. Many people and institutions see the need for change in order to prevent changes for themselves. Any changes should even protect or improve their or our current wellness and sense of security. Whatever change is introduced, the overall feeling is that it needs to make a positive contribution to, not a disruption of, our current individual or collective wellbeing.

Being a productive part of such change is much more motivating and rewarding than being a victim of it. Those who fear victimisation tend to oppose change fiercely, even narcissistically, rather than reinforcing or initiating it. In essence, the desire for change is mostly motivated by the fear of disruption, losing a situation of authority or wellbeing, or “not being able to develop oneself adequately”. This is not only the case for people in general; it is also relevant for institutions and individuals in dominant positions of power. In the human world of organised interests, all this causes a lot of friction and tension. In this manuscript, we will learn that this is not at all necessary and even counterproductive.

We need to learn to envisage change as an opportunity, not as a threat, as a conditioned responsibility, not something to avoid or hinder.

Indeed, it is not only change that is important; the key is the contextual trigger that motivates the changes. There is an important difference between defining change to forcefully uphold a financial status quo or improve a competitive political financial positioning, and contributing to the development of sustainable humankind as a natural living species. For the former, we have seen elements of greed, aggression, manipulation, foul play, warfare, trade, sacrifice, suppression and more. For the latter, we need to define, learn, structure and organise what is needed to sustain humankind as a natural species. Never before has humankind been faced with such a collective existential question or contextual choice. And never before has humankind been confronted with the urgent need to revolutionise against our own established, destructive yet well-organised status quo and competitive mindset in order to evolve and live.

*This book explores the historical logic and complexity of our human development and our potential **collective** breakthrough into a new phase for humankind, not as a drama but as an enthusiastic, self-aware next step.*

We introduce the context of natural human existentialism, with five core human values for our sustainable existence, positioning them as a shared responsibility of all people and institutions together.

A modern, new, self-aware and durable phase emerges, based on collective maturity, existentialism, harmony and symbiosis with each other and our natural environment.

My own turning point

About 30 years ago I decided to change the narrative of my own life. Later it expanded into my neighbourhood, the environment of business development and ultimately society as a whole. It was eventually dubbed "Sustainocracy", representing a joint approach to our sustainable development as a human species, initially at a regional level, with the involvement of all the usual leadership archetypes in a society. Sustainocracy also became known as the fourth layer of modern regional and societal development, the co-creation society or the layer of sharing existential values and responsibilities. Many preferred to refer to it as the "City (or region) of Tomorrow" or the "Society of Tomorrow".

For all the cases and interpretations, the operational introduction of this layer is evolutionary, a next step. The acceptance to participate, become

engaged and process the consequences, as a person or as an institution, is often experienced as a revolution.

In any case, in justification of the troubles, how motivating, satisfying and rewarding can it be to actively contribute to the sustainable existence of humankind and be recognised for it?

> *"The best way to deal with a change of paradigm is to imagine the functioning of the new one, instead of fearing the breakdown of the old one" (Sustainocracy).*

We are living in an era of important transformative changes. They do not come from the political and financial hierarchies or technological advancements. They are not motivated by economic growth, globalisation or technology. All these are contextualised expressions of the old human ecosystem, the one that developed over time, based on organised industrialised materialism, consumption and control. The real transformative changes come from people like you and me, irrespective of "old era functions". They are motivated by human existentialism, the overall ethics of our sustainable existence as a living organism, within the complexity of a natural and severely damaged ecosystem. The changes are often not just rational; they come about spiritually by giving meaning to life and responsibility in an emotionally caring way. The rationalisation comes afterwards, redefining our working formats, relations, means and structures.

Above all, the complexity of change is motivated and conducted by a new story that we wish to tell and pass on to our children.

It opens up an environment with challenges, new knowledge development, the repositioning of functions and related opportunities. Such a transformative beginning can manifest itself anywhere in society. It is unplanned, unprecedented, often desired to some extent but still unexpected. It appears and then starts making a difference, simply because we all start believing in it. It has happened before.

It is happening again, this time for our sustainable human existence.

Key in the overarching considerations at all levels of a modern society is the question "What are we as humankind?" Are we a means for an artificially created financial doctrine that has proven to be destructive for life in general, including our own sustainable expectations as a natural species? Are we only self-centred individuals, striving egocentrically for our own temporary fortune, even if this is at the expense of other people, our environment, our children or our long-term sustainable perspectives? Or are we a creative, self-aware, unique living species, capable of adapting

ourselves to each other and the ever-changing circumstances for the sustainable wellbeing of ourselves, our offspring and our entire species?

This contextual consideration, the individual and collective "What am I, what are we?" and the related "What do I take responsibility for, myself and together?", determines our behaviour and the consequences, positive and negative. This may involve nowadays the mature consideration of "What impact do my choices or initiatives have on the environment, humankind, our sustainable perspectives and my own peace of mind?" We can ask ourselves this by developing a contributive attitude. This is new and often highly confrontational, at a personal level, at an institutional level and as a society as a whole. We tend to come from a previous reality, the destructive one, where "taking" for the self was the norm, not "giving" or "contributing" for the commons. A reality where blind ignorance or denial of the consequences of our actions minimised our sense of existential responsibility. Our voluntary or painful confrontation with reality breaks through this ignorance or denial, inviting or forcing us to take action, by ourselves and together.

The longer we wait, the more problematic it gets and the fewer benefits we enjoy from our timely adjustment.

When we go very much back in time, to the possible natural origins of humankind within the confinement of nature's tropical abundance, we may find that the aspect of "taking" freely from nature was the behavioural norm. It was a matter of fact, a "garden of Eden" condition of the early cradle of humankind. A natural environment of giving in abundance that surrounded us did not trigger our consciousness, nor our sense of responsibility. There was always enough and we took what we needed, no more, no less.

This changed as humankind developed in size, starting to displace itself into different environments, having to adjust, adapt or compete to survive. It marked the evolution of our species through different phases and attitudes. The original taking attitude remained and needed to emotionally evolve with new elements, like creating and sharing. It, however, also introduced mental desires for cheating, controlling, competing, exerting power and social differentiation.

We have gone many times through the process of questioning what could provide a "better personal or collective outcome". Change, or try to sustain and defend the old status quo? The interpretation of what this "better outcome" means does not necessarily enjoy a common mental ground, justification or approach to realisation.

There was always a competitive shake-out in our evolution. Nowadays, however, there is more to it, something more fundamental, even existential.

We are invited to join and experience a personal, institutional or even collective, regional and even global, moral and behavioural breaking point (Close, Euro-Spes 2022, Springer, chapter 10), with huge behavioural differences between before and after.

At one time I started to experiment at a societal level with a personal new, sustainable, human-centred narrative. This was born after my own moral breaking point. Eventually, it led to many academic chapter publications, public presentations and articles in peer-reviewed journals. This time I feel motivated enough to bundle my experimental and empirical experiences in this international book. My initial work at a societal level and mental evolution was also presented in a series of books, published in Dutch between 2005 and 2012. At the time I was still fully immersed in the living-lab environment of my own city (Eindhoven) and region in Brabant, the Netherlands. This was where I experimented with my novel approach to reality, gradually with the involvement of all the common silos of the local society.

Now I sense the time has come for me to share my experiences and research with the world, hoping that others feel inspired to provide continuity in one way or another. If so, then I can feel at peace with myself and the proof of concept that I tried to realise, with the involvement of so many committed people and institutions. A collective, global new story emerges, one that we write together, producing a positive turning point in human evolution.

The book is built up in three main blocks:

- A series of reflections about the complexity of our human development.
- Breaking points after which things are done differently.
- Projects that I started from a shared existential responsibilities point of view.

Hopefully, you recognise useful elements in each of these blocks for yourself or the environment in which you live and wish to develop yourself. Maybe it confirms or reinforces your own breakpoint, or it leads you through it with confidence, after which a new era starts for you and your surroundings as well.

If it does, we may meet each other on this journey forward for ourselves and humankind. It will be a pleasure to greet you and continue the journey together.

CHAPTER 1

HUMAN EVOLUTION

"When did I realize that I had a choice? That was when I was confronted with it. I did not look for it. It was not a voluntary or rational process. It struck me as a bolt of lightning. Whatever choice I would make, it would mark the rest of my life." (Jean-Paul Close)

Human evolution never happens out of the blue. The elements that motivate anyone to come up with new ideas, implementations in society, breakthroughs or transformations find their seed in personal circumstances. It is not caused by large government institutions, scientific bureaus or huge multinationals. They may eventually enhance it, enlarge it, rationalise it and make it grow (or kill it). Our evolution starts somewhere else, often at home, at the kitchen table, in the shower, during a walk in the park. It is a natural human thing, not institutional. It can be me, you or our neighbour, or anyone who chooses to change direction. Many such choices remain unnoticed by the general public or society as a whole. But some do; they are transformative, marking a turning point for humankind. Often the one who initiated it will be rapidly forgotten as we collectively adopt the mindset and way forward. Meanwhile, the changes develop and mark a difference, a before and an after in the human timeline, a breaking point or transition era. That is when we evolve, hopefully in a positive direction but sometimes also negatively. It is then again up to evolution to correct itself, through life or death, or new changes.

In essence, "evolution in general" is an act of harmonisation within the complexity of all interacting living organisms and natural phenomena. It is triggered by imbalance, wherever this imbalance occurs. The reaction to imbalance can have many different patterns, triggering a chain of reactions, up to the appearance of a new situation of balance. We can imagine this imbalance by interpreting global crises, climate disturbances, wars, pollution, food shortages, etc., or at a personal level. They equally occur at microscopic and energetic levels, producing illnesses, emotional disturbances, bacterial mutations, pandemics and evolutionary challenges for our health resilience.

Evolution can be sensed as a gradual process with the introduction of minor modifications in our daily routines. Sometimes they are hardly no-

ticeable. It can also be disruptive, with a clearly altered pattern before and after the change. Evolution can be induced by us and the behavioural modifications of the human species, impacting ourselves and our living environment. It can equally be motivated by our environment, when it impacts us in many different possible ways.

As a consequence, scientific research (Sapolsky, 2023, Penguin Press) conducted by neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky shows that, in general, we do not seem to have free will. Our human lives are blindly conditioned by the laws of nature, mainstream society, the culture we live in and the way behaviour is passed on from generation to generation. We are individually and collectively, emotionally and mentally, attached to our existing comforts and habits around which societies have been built, and vice versa. It represents a particular dimension of interdependence in our day-to-day routines (Figure 1.1) that we hardly dispute, let alone challenge to change. Why would we? As long as we sense harmony in our daily lives, routines and their deliverables, we will not sense the conscious need to modify anything.

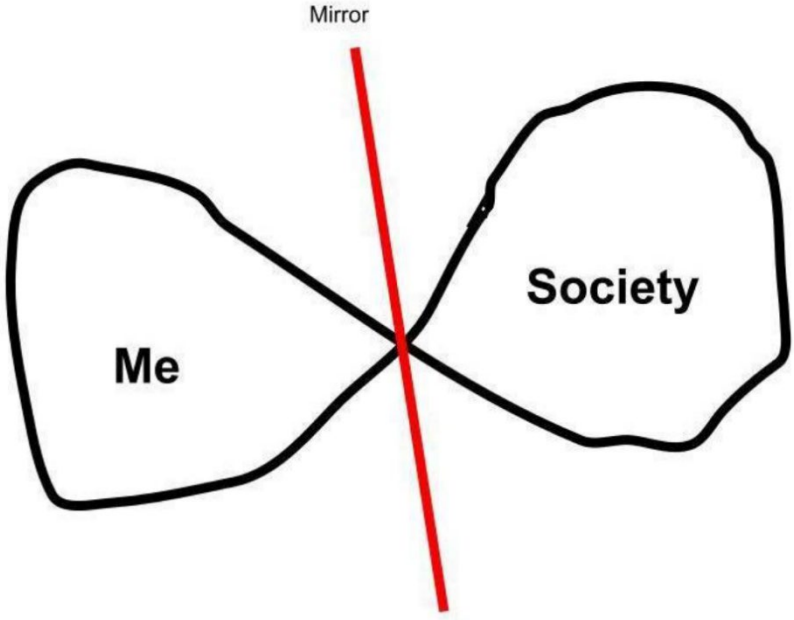

Figure 1.1: We tend to develop as a manifestation of our surroundings.

As such, we can observe the cultural diversity around the world in which people with equivalent DNA have evolved to differ in looks, behaviour, beliefs, language, rituals and habits. Even within the confines of a country, the cultural diversification can be observed between municipalities, regions and even generations. I remember reading about a linguistic analysis done in the United Kingdom that showed the regional migration patterns of families in the sixteenth or seventeenth century after analysing the local appearance of certain words and names.

With these examples, we see that with every act, every word spoken, every step taken and every breath, we unconsciously contribute to the evolutionary patterns, not only of humankind, but of everything that lives. Meanwhile, our conscious interpretation of and interaction with reality is very much conditioned by our direct surroundings, like our place of birth, our family and the surrounding cultural behaviour within our community. This may change if we migrate between surroundings, boosting our awareness due to the changes we need to interpret.

Despite the constant intergenerational cultural handover, our societies are changing, developing, collapsing, being rebuilt and somehow evolving throughout time. If we asked any random person who lived about 200 years ago to predict or envisage our current way of living, what answers would we receive? How far off would that person be? Our current (Western) reality would be unimaginable for them. Yet that same person lived a life according to his or her mainstream cultural conditioning within that timeframe, equally looking for improvements but reluctant to change, as we are today.

Routine is part of human nature, not change. Yet we change all the time.

Conscious change requires need, imagination and guts. Imagination to envisage something different, beyond our current comforts, that improves or repairs a situation that requires attention. It may come to us by chance, as a revelation, a discovery or surprise, that opens up new perspectives or dimensions to our interpretation of reality. But for that to happen we need to have an open mind to pay attention to such unexpected gifts. In the flow, or under pressure of our daily concerns, we tend to lack that openness. In general that openness is not even necessary. It would be highly mentally disturbing and maybe even messy if everyone were change-oriented all the time. Neurobiological studies (e.g. Klucharev et al., 2009) suggest that our conformity can be a way to prevent our brains from getting overburdened (e.g. stressed).

Changes tend to be introduced bit by bit, as we have been able to see with all the innovations that have enriched our lives and become part of our many comforts. Think of electric light, water from the tap, food in the supermarkets, cars, aeroplanes, television, mobile phones, the internet, toilet paper, etc. It is hard to imagine a life without them, yet many of these things did not exist 200 years ago. In 1899 the United States commissioner of patents, Charles Holland Duell, allegedly decided to resign his position in the registration office of patents with the remark that "everything that can be invented has been invented". Even though this remark has been debunked, it is a comical reference to our ignorance of what the future will bring.

Meanwhile, now, in our current twenty-first-century lives, we get as many mental impulses in a single day as general human beings, centuries ago, would perceive in a lifetime. The impact of those mainly human-generated impulses on our perception of reality is huge. It equally impacts the levels of balance and imbalance that our natural evolution needs to deal with. The effects show up in our daily routines through a large diversity of challenges: physical, mental, spiritual, etc. And also in the way we interact with the rest of our living surroundings. Humankind has reached a level of physical and energetic impact on ourselves and our environment that is historically unprecedented. In terms of evolutionary patterns that can be observed in nature, such an explosion of physical and energetic growth has two possible outcomes: collapse or fractalisation into new, smaller, more stable patterns.

Humankind is basically stupid.

Our conservative nature may be scientifically justified to avoid overburdening our minds with unnecessary creativity, worries and experiments. This condition was even interpreted and classified as "humankind is basically stupid", as described, among others, by Bence Nanay (Nanay, 2018). This article describes how triggers in our surroundings involuntarily affect our interpretation of reality and the choices we make. For instance, the type of music we listen to may influence our choice of wine. When we see more bearded men in our surroundings, we are likely to grow a beard as well. In evolutionary terms, we see that every action can count on a reaction that is oriented at an energetic act of harmonisation. Where the action can be rationalised, the reaction(s) cannot. The reaction, or even sum of reactions, can have many different, even unexpected outcomes.

When my wife was pregnant, I saw advertisements of diapers all around me. They were probably there also prior to her pregnancy, but I never noticed.

We can also distinguish between the group behaviour of people and the outbursts of innovative creativity of individuals that eventually can lead to change. It is not a collective virtue of humankind to be inventive, on the contrary. We only accept change if our surroundings do too, if we are confronted with it or if it is in our personal interest to do so. It is part of our herd dynamics. It is this kind of collective behaviour that, throughout history, has shown contradictory expressions that we would otherwise qualify as immoral, unbelievable and horrifying. How, for instance, could a generally friendly, passive and well-organised culture, like the Germans (or the Japanese), convert into a cold-blooded murdering machine during World War II? Or, even more disturbingly, how can hard-working Jews, who have suffered persecution, expatriation and even genocide throughout history, be instrumental in doing the same to the Palestinian people? Ancient tribes developed the unacceptable (nowadays) belief of reducing their hardships by sacrificing their first-born children! Or how did we make fellow human beings, maybe with different looks, into slaves?

And closer to our modern home and era, how can our commercial world, financial interests and consumer mindset disrupt, destroy and pollute the world, and even ourselves, beyond all limits of sustainability? Even today, people – men, women or children – are being killed, mutilated, suppressed, discriminated against, etc., out of financial or other interests, or religious beliefs, within a community or that of others.

It shows that humankind is not only collectively and inherently "stupid", but it can also be immensely cruel, naive and self-destructive.

But if this is the case, we can equally and contextually envisage the contrary and design and maintain a reality that can be kind, peaceful, collectively wise and existentially sustainable.

Context matters

We can interpret from the above that our behaviour is "context-driven". If we look at our own surroundings, we see that everything is normalised in a particular way. The bus drives according to a timetable; so do the TV programmes and our daily routines. We get up at a certain time in the morning, get dressed, have breakfast and do mostly the same routine as yesterday. The context is the trusted culture that we live in. We behave because it delivers to us what we need, partly as an automated daily activity.

We organise our lives in such a way that our actions and the corresponding reactions are accounted for within the context of our own expectations.

We only give it all special attention and thought when the deliveries of our automated world are disrupted, endangered or not satisfying enough anymore. This does not only apply to us as individuals. It applies to institutions and the functioning of society as well. That this behaviour may have huge, overarching, even degenerative consequences does not necessarily reach our minds, nor our daily choices or concerns. And if it does, we have the tendency to try to blame others in society, not ourselves.

We are not stupid; in our blind conformism we are simply ignorant.

Much of our current life is determined by the existence of institutions that try to uphold or expand their status quo. The financial ecosystem has its own conservative attitude towards self-interest and is very reluctant to change while it is naturally or forcefully (see the chapter on entrepreneurship), in the current context, focused on growth. Our blind self-interest (the taking) is part of an immature human reality that also extends to institutional positioning. Institutions may grow or go broke in this artificial, human-initiated, competitive financial network, but the financial network itself tries to uphold itself and grow against all odds. We are collectively naive and ignorant enough to keep this going because we have been doing it "all the time". We have become a normalised part of it. We do not seem to have any alternative to choose from. And if it gives us our benefits, why change?

It is not the first time that humankind has been subjected to the doctrine of institutions. We have seen a history of kingdoms and religions dominating our development and destruction.

That is why big societal changes tend to happen only through chaos, natural disasters, recessions, painful occurrences, war and collapse. Even with the scientific characterisation of our current human era, representing our "mass destruction of life on Earth, including our own", it is very difficult to envisage our own share of the problem, let alone develop our own contribution to solutions. "Why me?" is often heard as a remark, pointing to the overall behaviour of everyone else. Or, as American financial manipulator and speculator George Soros publicly stated in a recorded video[1]: "I don't care about the social consequences of my actions. If I don't do it, someone else will." The potential of mass destruction and possible collapse of our comforts may fill us with fear; it

[1] George Soros, "The Interview George Soros doesn't want you to see".

also psychologically produces extra protective adherence to our comforts rather than desires to develop change. We may also find comfort in denial, shifting the responsibility for damage or change to others, while doing our best to uphold our own perception of wellness.

Even though there is an imperative need to break with our collective behavioural and cultural heritage, which has crossed the line of existential sustainability, there is a blind and powerful adherence to our current blessings.

Our (Western) societal system, which has developed around political and financial dominance, has brought us a particular perception of wellness, innovations, luxury and knowledge. It has also become a degenerative human and ecological spiral that inevitably leads to numerous problems. Many of these issues can be detected in our own society and maybe even in our personal circumstances as we speak. This does not only refer to interest-driven wars, genocides, interregional clashes, war threats and aggression that reach our concerns. It is also the long-term global destruction of our natural habitat, pollution of the air, water and soil, out of short-term financial interests and public ignorance. We can equally detect the exponential growth of mental and physical health problems, huge refugee flows, individualism, suicides, loneliness, inflation, etc.

> *It is not smart to destroy our habitat, our health and sustainable perspectives, it is stupid.* (Close, 2015)

The problems do not only affect people in poor and distant developing countries anymore; they also massively reach us as individuals and communities in our "rich" Western cultures. Despite all the signs and symptoms, we seem massively incapable of breaking with this evolutionary heritage. We tend to point to institutions, like the government or business, to produce changes or take responsibility. But these institutions were contextually born and thrive in the financial world, often massively supported by our own attitude.

A director of a large multinational came to the table for regional air quality together with six lawyers. His standpoint was: "We cannot be made responsible for the environmental pollution, only for the quality of our products."

Existential attention to our sustainable perspectives is a human issue, represented by a population growing to ten billion individuals. Institutions can be helpful, but the context and direction need to be provided at a human existential level. After all, institutions are led and populated by human beings, interacting with human beings.

As human beings we are all equal from an existential perspective, with equal responsibilities. Our functions in society, no matter how high up in the chain of command or impact, are subordinated to our sustainable human existence. (sustainocracy)

Meanwhile, from a harmonisation perspective, we stepped out of the interaction with our natural environment. Instead, we decided to develop our own perception of harmony and control at the expense of our natural environment. Living nature has been seeking harmony for over four billion years on our planet through evolutionary patterns. The conditions on our planet have been optimal for life to flourish abundantly this way. It will continue to do so as long as the conditions for life remain optimal. There have been several occasions when these conditions were severely disrupted by impactful events such as meteor strikes or volcanic eruptions. This is probably the first time that an intelligent, self-aware species is producing such a disruptive impact. From a harmonisation perspective, there is a difference between us and the historical impacts of volcanoes and stones from space. Humankind is not a specific event; it represents an interactive process. Action and reaction affect both sides – nature and humankind. With one big difference: nature's evolution is just life-oriented, with or without human beings.

Humankind has everything to lose when it does not harmonise with nature again, instead of selfishly trying to do it the other way around.

We are NOT stupid.

By addressing existential natural issues, we may introduce new or forgotten comforts and awareness into our lives. We can take back control of our own integral wellness, instead of leaving it to institutions, while developing it as a community. We may even learn to understand that we ARE nature ourselves – that by destroying nature, we destroy ourselves.

We may gradually learn to become self-aware living human beings again, working on our core existential values. We may even be redefining society in the process by making minor or major self-aware adjustments to our daily activities. We will learn to define and use our choices, proving that **we are not stupid**, that we do have a choice and free will, while paying attention to the deeper layers of our existence. Our conservatism is not related to adhering to the fakeness of "stuff", but to the genuineness of our own divine meaningfulness.

"Our fear-based materialism has alienated us from our own natural selves, projecting our existence on external factors while disconnecting us from our true and natural essence. Breaking with this situation will bring

us back to our authentic selves and the tremendous wealth of our existence."

In essence, we are invited to rediscover the authenticity and uniqueness of our existence, and develop this accordingly, but with the knowledge of today. In this book, I will explore breaking with our intelligent "stupidity" as a trend with which we can all engage. We will look at it from different perspectives through several examples: as human beings, institutions, entire cities or regions and as a society, with everyone involved.

> *"You only see it when you get it" (Johan Cruijff, famous footballer and manager).*

Hopefully, you become aware, or reassured, that you are part of it, that you can help develop it, contribute and reap the many benefits, no matter what function or position you have in society. I am not saying that it will be easy – it never is, especially in the beginning – but it provides perspective, mindfulness, purpose, belief in yourself, empowerment, leadership, positiveness and determination. And above all "trust" in ourselves and our future.

For many who experience this, it is "the new rich", not in terms of finance, but more in terms of integral health, wisdom, care, meaning, purpose, energetic abundance, connection, positiveness, wellness and peace.

Evolutionary phases for humankind

We do not have to deep dive into archaeology to get to an understanding of the evolution of humankind. We only have to look at our biological selves, from conception to birth and from childhood to adulthood in their different development phases. Our conception, for instance, is already a miracle of life at a sub-molecular level, with the bonding of unique, life-producing energetic frequencies. The genetic coding, captured in the seeds provided by our parents, already carries the entire history of the evolution of life on Earth and even the universe. The genetic unification, the love-based merger of our ancestors, represents an eternal and evolutionary contribution to life in general, a next step.

As the embryo develops in the protected environment of our mother's womb, it goes through all the evolutionary stages. Eventually, after about nine months, the full-grown baby is born as a new human being. It is the first physical and emotional letting-go moment of the mother. Equally, it is the first physical and emotional encounter with the father, developing a

triangular intergenerational bond of collaboration and protection that is needed to grow to adulthood and provide continuity of the process.

Humankind evolved as a unique species, following the same patterns of evolution as all species. In ancient pre-history we see a diversity of humanoid variations out of which our kind seemed eventually the most adaptive and resilient. All others disappeared. Ever since we can see the same development phases of entire humankind as those of our self. Here I compare both, firstly our own growth phases versus those of humankind (underlined in the title, bullet point in the text):

1. *Childhood phase – unconsciously living life.*

Generally, we grow up in a playful, experimentational manner under the protective wings of the parents or community. We are generally not burdened yet with the challenges of life that unfold gradually as we experiment with it.

- In the case of the early era, the childhood phase of humankind, it was the protective wings of mother nature under ideal "giving" circumstances (The garden of Eden analogy) and abundance.

2. *Teenage phase – unconscious competitive life.*

As we grow up we encounter others of our age. We compete to learn about our own abilities in comparison with others. We learn to deal with friendship, jealousy, enemies, bullying, etc., normally under the protective and corrective wings of adults.

- For humankind this represents our early discovery of the use of tools, our experimentation within new territories, conflicts between tribes, fear of natural phenomena and survival in adverse circumstances. Humankind did not have the mature guidance to protect or correct. We had to find out the hard way without parental guidance.

3. *Puberty phase – conscious competitive life.*

We gradually develop our ego, trying to disconnect from our parents in order to get on with our own lives. Our immature competitive nature is now consciously self-centred.

- For humankind, this represents the confusion about what we are, the development of religions and hierarchies, institutions, self-centred warfare, ownership claims, etc. We are still stuck today in this evolutionary phase, having difficulty breaking through into collective maturity.

4. *Maturity phase – consciously living life.*

In this phase we learn to largely let go of competition in order to develop lasting relationships. This is the first step towards an existentialist mentality while eventually also having children of our own.

- For humankind, we now know what we are and develop a common existential purpose with collaborative caring and serving partnerships, also with nature. We abandon ownership and hierarchies while developing expertise, co-creation, shared benefits, diplomacy and values-driven initiatives, and focus on harmonic wellness.

Even maturity has evolutionary gradients that are defined by levels of inner peace, compassion and empathy, with a supportive, creative and non-conflictive attitude towards ourselves and our surroundings, with existentialist role modelling for our youth as upcoming generations.

For humankind as an evolutionary whole, we arrived at our collective state of puberty probably about 20,000–30,000 years ago, when we learned to take ownership of our surroundings, develop our self-centred ego and demand favours from others out of our competitive self-interest. We are still positioned firmly in this collective immature state, which we even institutionalised and normalised, standing in the way of our collective maturity. History has shown that this overarching immature state of aggressive, fragmented, self-centred competitiveness destroyed any first signs of evolutionary maturity at a regional level.

When immaturity rules, the mature are forced to behave immaturely, are killed or isolate themselves. When, however, maturity rules, immaturity is guided to maturity.

Modern literature about human maturity tends to relate to physical, mental or sexual ripeness. The type of transition from organisational and societal immaturity to maturity that I am introducing here suggests an important evolutionary step. Even science has taken our competitive nature as a matter of fact, without even considering the development phases of self-aware species such as humankind. This seems to be changing. In a recent article published in a Dutch newspaper, two academics, Cees Cools (economy) and Jim van Os (psychiatry), argued that "the economy drives us crazy". Their arguments about the competitive and alienating nature of the traditional interpretation of an economy line up very well with my own, as reflected in the chapters of this book.

Recognising our immature madness is just one step. It does not yet present a new and healing narrative, while it does challenge us to introduce it. What approach to reality makes us mentally sound, mature and healthy?

In our individual growing-up processes, the first steps into maturity are introduced when we develop partnerships of love. The affection between individuals demands the acceptance of non-competitive, constructive dialogue with empathy, listening and connection. The energetic interaction is not based on conflict; it is based on community building, cohesion and positive living interaction.

Having children introduces the protective attitude, the companionship, division of tasks and a natural nesting for evolutionary continuity. For humankind as a whole, this trigger into maturity is much more difficult to find, especially when we have individualised and institutionalised ourselves into cold, fragmented, short-term competitive materialism, instead of protective collectivism and sustainable care and existentialism.

Under normal circumstances, at an individual level, we enjoy the mature role modelling of our parents or community leadership. They guide us through our puberty, with all its irresponsible, stupid and painful experiences, into our own state of early maturity. In fact, puberty is psychologically seen as a key element in our individualised evolution, a phase in which we gradually discover our true self, develop our abilities and moral senses through trial and error. We disconnect from our ancestors and develop our own phase of mature and shared responsibility through painful and experimental lessons of life. It is a well-determined phase and bridge between our childhood and adulthood.

As humankind we do not have that parental role model, nor reference of mature behaviour, unless we learn to read the laws and wisdom of nature as such. Religions have presented themselves as moral representatives through the definition of one or more dogmatic, critical, judgemental, invisible, celestial (father) figures. Some of these institutions positioned themselves also as competitive hierarchies of spiritual governance, with their expressions of ownership of a particular interpretation of the truth and related behavioural formats and rituals. Many religions define a triangle between a universal invisible power and the duality of humankind and nature. It shows again the human tendency to try to fragment the complexity of our existence in order to try to grasp it in our understanding. These fragmented expressions tend to get institutionalised and start living a life of their own in the behavioural ecosystem of our societies. Instead of providing intellectual or mature guidance, they often present themselves as forced impositions.

In order to let go of our irresponsible egocentrism and mental confusion, we need to learn to develop our existential collectivism while finding individual meaning and satisfaction in the role of contributing to the com-

mon good. This also applies to our institutions, forms of leadership, common behavioural and contextual framing. Like this, through effective self-regulation, we can take away the sharp edges of both excessive materialistic narcissism and extreme poverty or suffering.

This fourth evolutionary phase requires a definite and lasting breakthrough, away from controlled and institutionalised aggression or domestication, into a mature and overarching caring behaviour for the protection and sustainable development of humankind.

This book introduces a path with which I have experimented over the years. But evolution is not just an experiment. It requires integration into society for continuity. That takes time, commitment and further implementation that goes well beyond my own initiatives and span of life. All I can do is present my own trials, motivations, results and experiences for others to acknowledge and maybe take over or improve. People have come to see what I was doing in my home town, learning about the format of Sustainocracy and the broad involvement of people and institutions. They often claimed: “It exists, now we want it too!”

To realise this, certain steps are key: a narrative, a commitment, a roadmap, a blueprint, a contextual format. Then we realise that maturity is resident already in ourselves and many societies; it just needs to break through, with a little help. And any of us can be that help.

CHAPTER 2

MY PERSONAL TRANSFORMATIVE BREAKING POINT

"Sometimes we make a choice that changes everything."

A choice to make

In 1996, I found myself at a breaking point in my personal life. Up to that year, at the age of 38, my life had been conducted the way that my family and society had expected of me (Figure 1). I had performed the way I had been educated, guided by the upbringing of my parents, my schooling, including a variety of university degrees, and the different cultures in which we had lived. I was born in the Netherlands in 1958, and when I was 16 my family decided to move to Spain. My father had led an executive life during my entire youth, travelling mainly to South America on behalf of a Dutch multinational. Thanks to his command of the Spanish language, he accepted a general management position in Spain.

For me this was the start of an international lifestyle and the further development of my own identity. In a way it was a breaking point already. As a teenager in the Netherlands, I had been shy, a beta student (i.e. good at mathematics) and doing well in horse-riding competitions. The move to Spain forced me to overcome my shyness, unexpectedly adding some alpha (good at languages) to my curriculum. I developed my Spanish in the local community and my English at the international school that we joined. Horse riding was a luxurious elite sport in Spain and not exactly fit for city life in Barcelona. I took up judo instead.

This shows that my integration into a totally new environment made me develop entirely new skills. It helped to enrich my awareness about different cultures and my broader interpretation of realities.

The move also had a powerful emotional impact on my siblings and me, and there were important lessons to learn. The first few years were difficult, of course, with various integration patterns to deal with. Meanwhile, I had personally left behind an environment in the Netherlands with a certain popularity (horse-riding circles) and corresponding friends. This