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On the Threshold
Some considerations on the relationship between present and future in the perspective of sustainability

Abstract

This paper investigates the concept of sustainability through the metaphor of the threshold, reframing the temporal relationship between present and future. Moving beyond the dominant logic in which present determines future possibilities, the analysis proposes a reversal: the future, in its indeterminacy, shapes the present. By engaging with key philosophical perspectives, the threshold is interpreted as a generative, relational and liminal space where transformation becomes possible. This conceptual lens allows for a renewed understanding of sustainability not as a fixed goal but as an open-ended process oriented toward a *future in common*. The paper emphasizes the ethical and political significance of this shift, highlighting how sustainability entails not only intergenerational responsibility but also a reformulation of collective subjectivity, grounded in care, relationality and vulnerability.

Keywords: Sustainability, threshold, future, common

1. A sort of premise

The reflections presented in these pages are centered on the concept of sustainability, a theme that occupies a pivotal position in the global public discourse, embodying both an urgent, non-deferrable

commitment and presenting a multifaceted array of complex and problematic dimensions that demand critical scrutiny[1].

Although the pursuit of sustainable policies is widely acknowledged as a primary goal[2], the concept of sustainability itself resists a uniform definition. As has been widely observed, the very term of sustainability lends itself to multiple interpretations, revealing an inherent ambiguity[3]. The term *sustainability* has undergone a significant semantic expansion, progressively extending its reach to encompass all dimensions of human relationality. Originally associated with the environmental domain - and thus oriented toward the development of policies and strategies aimed at protecting nature understood as an ecosystem, in what is commonly referred to as *ecological sustainability* - the concept has gradually broadened its systemic scope[4]. It has come to incorporate, first, the economic dimension and, more recently, the social one. These three dimensions now constitute the foundational *three pillars* of sustainability, implying a necessary synergy and interdependence among them[5]. Yet it is precisely this interplay – marked by overlapping domains, competing priorities, and divergent normative assumptions – that contributes to the semantic indeterminacy of the concept itself; its invocation across multiple normative frameworks exposes its inherent polysemy and this ambiguity undermines the possibility of coherent and consistent legal and policy formulations[6]. For this reason, the present inquiry does not aim to exhaust the full range of conceptual and practical tensions underlying the notion of sustainability. Rather, it will focus specifically on its temporal dimension and thus the relationship between the present and the future, or more precisely, between current and future generations[7].

The analysis will highlight, in particular, the need to invert the conventional ordering of the relationship between present and future, challenging the prevailing logic whereby present interests dictate the scope of future possibilities. To this end, the metaphor of the threshold will be employed

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[1] See Anand-Sen (2000).

[2] Among the most recent head documents on sustainability, the 2030 Agenda has been signed by all 193 member countries of the United Nations, according to UN sources. This means that, in principle, all countries in the world are committed to achieving the sustainable development goals set by the Agenda by 2030. See UN, United Nations (2015), Agenda 2030, SDGs -Sustainable Development (Goals. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda).

[3] On the intrinsic conceptual vagueness of sustainability, see, among others: Purvis B., Mao Y., Robinson D., 2019: 681-695; S. Ciccarelli, 2005: 35-56; Y. Jabareen, 2008: 179-192. See also: Brown (1987: 713-719).

[4] Since the second half of the last century, attention to the fate of humanity has initially focused on the relationship between humans and their surrounding environment. In this regard, the Preamble of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration from the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment asserts that "to defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations has become an imperative goal for humanity - a goal to be pursued together, in harmony with the established and fundamental objectives of peace and global economic and social development" (see https://undocs.org/en/A/CONF.48/14/Rev.1). This concern has progressively intensified, enriching and specifying the ways in which this solemn commitment can be addressed. Key milestones in this evolution include the 1987 report authored by the World Commission on Environment and Development, commonly known as the Brundtland Report; the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also referred to as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro; and most recently, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). See Cruz (2007).

[5] In this sense, it has been commented: "This tripartite description is often, but not always, presented in the form of three intersecting circles of society, environment and economy, with sustainability being placed at the intersection" see: Purvis et al. (2019: 681). See also Osorio et al. (2005).

[6] See Cullet (2017).

[7] See, among others: Barry (1978); Partridge (1981); Tremmel (2009), Menga (2016).

not merely as a rhetorical device, but as a conceptual tool capable of capturing the liminal condition in which legal and political decision-making increasingly unfolds[8].

The pertinence of the threshold metaphor depends on and underscores the law's inherent incapacity to establish clear and determinate boundaries in its efforts to regulate reality[9]. Law seeks to demarcate limits, the conceptual enclosures within which fragments of the world are endowed with legal significance[10]. Yet, as widely observed in contemporary legal and philosophical theory, this definitional function is intrinsically fraught and epistemically unstable[11]. The law's definitional ambition is currently undergoing a profound crisis[12], one that is further exacerbated by the increasing difficulty of identifying the spatial and temporal boundaries within which legal meaning might be coherently fixed; boundaries that now appear fluid, contingent, and perpetually in flux.

This difficulty becomes particularly evident in the context of sustainability policies. On the one hand, globalization reveals that rulemaking must take into account the effects produced beyond the territorial boundaries within which legal norms have traditionally been situated[13]. On the other hand, the pursuit and implementation of sustainable development, defined as the relationship between present and future generations[14], require a reconfiguration of the relationship between the temporal categories of the present and the future. In particular, the need to reverse the way the relationship between present and future is ordered will be highlighted. What fundamentally distinguishes sustainable choices is their inherently forward-looking nature; as will be argued, sustainability essentially consists in the formulation and adoption of norms and practices designed to ensure humanity's continued existence within a framework oriented toward well-being. This projection into the future inevitably entails grappling with the intrinsic uncertainty that characterizes it. The insurmountable nature of this uncertainty will be examined through its dispositive function: in this regard, the future can be understood as actively shaping the present[15]. To elucidate the terms of this inversion in the temporal relationship between present and future, the metaphor of the threshold proves particularly rich and insightful.

The concept of the threshold, in fact, offers a highly productive network of meanings for understanding sustainability, as it, as I will specify later, identifies a 'margin' that simultaneously

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[8] See: Ricca (2008: 257). He notes: *"Scegliere una metafora oppure un'altra per costruire la nostra rappresentazione mentale di un fenomeno o di una situazione equivale a una scelta di tipo strategico, con finalità pratiche. Esse hanno perciò un impatto immediato sul piano linguistico e pragmatico"*.

[9] See: Derrida (1994).

[10] As is well known, Hart brought to the fore the intrinsic indeterminacy of legal norms, encapsulated in his evocative notion of a "penumbra of uncertainty"; see Hart (1961).

[11] See Ricca (2020: 192). He points out: *"The regime of correlation between the legal universe of discourse and the social (natural) one – the elements of which the first cannot avoid including in itself – is not a static semantic equation and cannot be presupposed as such"*.

[12] See on the topic, among others: La Torre (2020). As a response to the current crisis of legal and political reason, it seems useful to point out: Ferrajoli (2007).

[13] See on this point: Sen (2010).

[14] See Maffettone (2011).

[15] This reversal of the way of understanding the relationship between the present and the future finds an essential reference in philosophical reflections of a phenomenological orientation. Emblematically, it has in fact been argued that the present constitutes a trace of the future. See Derrida (1972: 102-103).

separates and unites[16]. This dynamic and relational nature of the threshold resonates with key philosophical reflections on temporality and transformation. Walter Benjamin, who distinguishes between the concepts of limit (*finis*) and threshold (*limes*) – that is, 'the line' and 'the zone' – uses the word "*Schwelle*" which encapsulates the meanings of passage, overflow, and change[17]. Thus, the threshold does not merely correspond to a border that divides and separates, but it is also what enables movement, the act of going beyond. From this perspective, it expresses an idea of dynamism, mobility, and therefore implies the possibility of change and transformation.

It is precisely change and transformation that primarily characterizes the practices and normative choices adopted within the framework of sustainability, particularly when these aim to move beyond a model of development that is *"unattainable, unsustainable in the long run, essentially not sustainable"*[18]. In this context, the margin – the threshold – can be understood as a conceptual figure from which the redefinition of the very notion of development, now central to global public discourse, emerges. I will thus seek to apply the interpretative potential of the threshold to the temporal dimension.

This paper first will outline some key conceptual features of the notion of the *threshold*, with the aim of establishing a robust theoretical framework for critically engaging with the temporal dimension of sustainability. The threshold will be considered not merely as a spatial or symbolic boundary, but as a dynamic locus of transition, capable of reconfiguring established temporal categories and normative orientations.

In the second part, I turn to the foundational text of sustainability discourse: the 1987 Brundtland Report. I will examine how sustainability is positioned on the threshold between the present and the future, and explore the complex, and at times problematic, relationship between current and future generations. This intergenerational relation will be interrogated in terms of its normative implications, particularly its capacity to redefine the collective subject – the "we" – and to resituate the meaning of living in common. Drawing on the very title of the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, I argue that it may be productively interpreted as a *future in common*, invoking not only a future held in common, but also a future that constitutes the condition of possibility for a renewed ethical and political imagination of commonality. The implications of this representational shift will be critically assessed, particularly in light of the uncertainties that structure our projections into the future which allow, or more precisely require, an approach marked by an ethics of care.

2. 'Being' on the threshold

The threshold undoubtedly represents one of the most powerful images that, over the centuries, have animated philosophical reflection.

The humanities, visual arts, and literature, in particular, have shaped this notion according to their own languages and canons, 'exploiting' its significant potential, which makes it a *topos* of

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[16] For a philosophical representation of the concept of limit, see: Derrida (1996). As is well known, the concept of limit constitutes one of the most significant and debated philosophical issues. Within the extensive body of relevant literature, it seems useful to mention, among many: Bodei (2016).

[17] See Benjamin (2000: 555). Benjamin also distinguishes the term 'border' (which marks the limit) from that of 'threshold', which is understood as a frontier, that is, a space that allows the transit of something, a passage that allows crossing.

[18] See Maffettone (2011: 19).

'transition', that is, the decisive moment that transforms the possible into an event. Thus, from a linguistics and semiology perspective, Ronald Barthes highlights the creative power of the threshold, identifying it as the place where the meaning is not merely revealed, but actively produced through the interplay between signifier and signified[19]. The threshold, in Barthes' semiotic approach, is understood as a generative space, a zone of negotiation, where textual meaning emerges as an effect of structural tensions and readerly engagement. Gèrard Genette, for his part, emphasizes the fundamental mediating function of the threshold, particularly in the form of the 'paratext' which encompasses titles, prefaces, and other liminal devices that frame and orient the reception of the narrative[20]. The threshold, for Genette, is not external to the text but an integral part of its architecture, shaping the reader's entry into the fictional world and guiding interpretative paths. More broadly, in both cases, the threshold is conceived as a dynamic instrument of intelligibility: not a passive boundary, but a place of passage and transformation.

The threshold can be understood, in other terms, as the site of rupture between two spaces, or two entities; yet, at the same time, it functions as a point of access: it is a kind of permeable 'border', insofar as the boundary it seems to delineate is not defined by stasis but remains mobile, 'open'.

This peculiarity of the threshold turns it into a very fertile philosophical figure, one that both contains and designates unrealized potentialities, offering them the possibility of coming into being. However, it proves to be a particularly complex concept, characterized by its intrinsic ambiguity; in fact, the duality and symbolic nature of this concept, paradoxically uniting what separates, do not express a synthesis but rather an opening, as it brings together otherwise divided domains. More specifically, the relationship between the two domains is not structured in oppositional terms, following a logic of inclusion versus exclusion; but rather unfolds through a logic of complementarity.

Situated between two distinct realities, the threshold gives rise to an *in-between* that unites and mediates: it constitutes, in other words, *"a productive sphere in which something originates for the first time"*[21]. As mentioned earlier, in this sense, Walter Benjamin has observed that the threshold designates a transitional and generative interstice[22]: a site of passage which, while establishing a demarcation between two spaces, also puts them in communication. The threshold thus operates as a liminal zone that both circumscribes and opens, that marks a boundary and simultaneously allows for crossing, for movement, for transformation. In this perspective, the passage the threshold indicates is not a static line but rather a zone of exchange, connection, and openness between two dimensions.

It thus becomes evident that the semantic scope of the concept of the threshold cannot be confined to a merely geographical or spatial dimension; rather, it extends to the temporal sphere as well, marking the articulation between a 'before' and an 'after.' More incisively, it is possible to infer that the significance of the threshold reaches into every domain of existence and being that is shaped by relationality. As a figure inherently defined by relationality, the threshold does not merely serve as a mediator between entities; it embodies the very structure of relation itself. Its very emergence is, in this sense, a *Schwellenerfahrung*[23]: a threshold experience, in which transformation, transition, and the possibility of meaning are made manifest. In fact, it does not present or order a duality; rather, it

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[19] See Barthes (1965).
[20] See Genette (1989).
[21] See Waldenfels (2012: 148).
[22] See Benjamin (2000).
[23] See Benjamin (2000).

sustains a relation between two distinct entities that, through their interaction, mutually influence one another. So, it is a convergence point that has a generative character in a dual sense: it opens up multiple possibilities but is also continually redefined by the interactions and dynamics that take place within it.

The threshold, in this sense, does not divide; it is not a 'frontier' to be crossed but a 'shared experience', and therefore what allows the relationship[24]: it enables a relation, a dynamic interplay. Nancy articulates the threshold as being, in essence, a place of passage and possibility that reveals itself only in the very moment it is crossed[25].

The idea of crossing implies a continuous openness within which multiple possibilities are situated, so that the essence of the threshold seems to consist in its multidimensionality.

This essential feature of the threshold clearly shows that it does not oppose the terms it brings into relation but rather composes them. In this regard, Jacques Derrida's reflections prove particularly fruitful. His *deconstructive* approach, whose aim is precisely to dismantle every oppositional structure, reveals that the threshold is marked by its *porous boundaries*, which prevent meaning from settling into fixed or definitive forms[26]. The threshold resists closure: it calls for an acknowledgment of indeterminacy, undecidability, and thus a fundamental condition of openness: by referring to the threshold, the focus is on that which is *to come* (*à venir*). Derrida's notion of *à venir* - the "to come" that resists any determination - aptly illustrates the compositional nature of the threshold[27]. It is this "not yet," this suspended temporality, that discloses the threshold's operative capacity and offers the semantic framework within which to rethink the relationship between time and the categories of present and future.

As is well known, Derrida's conception of temporality hinges on the interplay between actuality and inactuality. Time, in his thought, is structured aporetically: the event always holds within itself both the affirmation of what is and the possibility of its opposite, its negation, which may emerge at any moment. In this sense, the *"not yet"* (*pas encore*) can be understood within the framework of this aporia, which suspends determination and preserves the full range of potentialities[28]. The present, therefore, is not a closed or self-contained moment but rather the locus of infinite possibilities that may or may not unfold.

Temporality, for Derrida, is thus fundamentally marked by alterity, an otherness that is always yet to come (*à venir*), never fully actualized, never fully present. The present is, in other words, inscribed with absence. It cannot prefigure or predetermine the future, cannot anticipate its content, but can only open itself toward it, arranging conditions in which the future might become possible.

This relationship between present and future is one of mutual implication, defined by the tension between presence and absence. The passage through which the future becomes present - the threshold - can thus be understood in terms of the *trace*. As Derrida puts it: *"There is no contradiction in thinking*

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[24] See Nancy (2007: 92). He notes: "*L'esperienza è traversata, trasbordo, trasporto incessante da un bordo all'altro, lungo il tragitto che delinea e limita un'arealità*".

[25] Nancy's reflection on the point unravels through the device of the 'body', which 'marks' the limit of the subject; in this sense he states: "*un corpo è il luogo che apre, che distanzia, che spazia capo e coda: dando loro luogo per fare evento*". See Nancy (2007: 18). See also Id. (2016) where he specifies that the threshold does not simply separate or join, it is the very place of passage, of communication, of openness to the 'common'.

[26] See Derrida (1996a: 12-13).

[27] See Derrida (1991: 21).

[28] Derrida discusses the concept of "*pas encore*" in: Derrida (1993: 25).

together, in terms of the trace, what is erased and what is traced"[29]. The trace, in its essence, indicates an absence within presence: it is a mark that simultaneously sustains and signifies what is not fully present, what is no longer or not yet fully there.

In this sense, the future, understood as the absent dimension structuring the present, does not function as something determinable from within the present. Instead, it operates like a prism, refracting multiple trajectories, opening a range of possible directions. It is precisely within this horizon of indeterminacy that the present acquires meaning. As Derrida, drawing from Merleau-Ponty, suggests: *"the essential possibility of the visible is not visible"*[30]. The invisible - the future - conditions the visible without ever being fully contained by it.

The perspective of *à venir* requires us to recognize the impossibility, for the present, of prefiguring the future: the present cannot define what is to come, cannot pretend to anticipate or grasp it in advance[31]. It can only receive it and *welcome it*. Within this horizon, the threshold emerges as the site of encounter, the space where any encounter becomes possible. In this sense, the threshold enables a rearticulation of our relation to alterity. This reconfiguration entails a shift away from logics of assimilation or identification, opening instead to a mode of relation grounded in difference.

The 'inappropriability' of the other[32], that depends on the impossibility of reducing the other to sameness, becomes the very condition through which the *common* can be thought. Thus, the threshold offers an opportunity to question relationality and provides a fertile perspective to inquire into what is 'common'.

The meaning of this term is extremely relevant: as has been pointed out, the common is that which is neither one's own nor can be appropriated by anyone, it is that which belongs to everyone or at least to many - and therefore does not relate to the same, but to the other[33]. Within this depiction, Jean-Luc Nancy offers a nuanced reflection on the relationship between the threshold and the common: the threshold does not merely function as a boundary or limit; rather, it constitutes a space of encounter, a site of exposure where the 'common' comes into presence. He states, with his usual evocative and imaginative style: *"This jarring opening in the midst of full withdrawal, from within full withdrawal. this spaced, nervous density that spreads through all that is proper, and that cannot be appropriated without unfolding, without becoming to itself its own foreign land, without turning meaning, its own meaning, into something else—an extension without which meaning might perhaps be meaningful, but never, nowhere, take place"*[34].

This 'common' is not a pre-given substance or a foundational identity shared in advance. On the contrary, it emerges through the relational dynamics that unfold at the threshold, through gestures of mutual openness, co-presence, and interaction among singularities[35]. In this sense, the 'common' is not

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[29] See Derrida (1972: 102-103).
[30] See Derrida (1993b: 77).
[31] See Derrida (2016: 91-92). He also mentions the impossibility for the future to be defined in advance in Derrida (1996b: 118-119). In particular, he points out: *"Nous sommes pris dans un chiasme entre une anticipation qui annule l'avenir, et l'événement qu'on ne voit pas venir, qu'on attend sans attendre ni horizon d'attente... Appeler d'avance un événement, c'est le neutraliser, le réduire, le présentifier, le transformer en mémoire... C'est annuler l'avenir..."*
[32] See Derrida (1967: 84-85).
[33] See Esposito (2008: 116).
[34] See Nancy (2007: 49).
[35] See Nancy (2001: 103).

what unites individuals by erasing their differences, but what is constituted in and through the very sharing of exposure and difference[36].

The threshold thus becomes a figure of both separation and relation, a locus of passage where the conditions for the 'common' are continuously negotiated and generated, expressing a space of co-belonging, where a shared experience is realized[37]. The community, that originates from the experience of the common, is not the sum of the individuals who compose it, but rather the opening of each one toward the other, the relinquishing of all identitarian closure, and the crossing of a threshold. It is constituted not by aggregation, but by relation that does not presuppose a stable essence or a fixed identity, but which emerges in the very act of exposure to the other, in the vulnerability that precedes and exceeds the self. To belong to a community is not to enclose oneself within a shared identity, but to risk oneself in a space of becoming, where singularities touch without merging, and where difference is not dissolved but sustained as the condition of a common world. The threshold that is crossed is both symbolic and existential: it marks the passage from possession to dispossession, from the logic of the self-contained subject to that of a being-in-common that does not totalize but holds open the space of co-existence.

The most significant implication of this conception lies in understanding the relationship with the other without resorting to reductionism or assimilating the other into oneself. The threshold delineates distinct domains, positioning them in relation to one another without erasing their differences or rendering them homogeneous. This distinction-relation inherent to the threshold does not neutralize particularities; rather, it enables the orientation toward a specific direction. Consequently, the threshold cannot be regarded as a neutral boundary but as a site that demands the adoption of a determinate trajectory within the manifold and continuously negotiated directions that the margin affords.

The need to identify trajectories is, after all, one of the most defining features of the discourse on sustainability. Sustainability is not a static condition, but rather a dynamic process that requires the continuous negotiation of paths, directions. For this reason, the concept of the threshold proves particularly apt for guiding a critical reflection on sustainability and for interrogating some of its foundational dimensions. It opens the possibility of understanding sustainability not merely as a goal to be reached, but as a space of ongoing passage, uncertain, contested, and in need of constant rearticulation. In pursuit of this objective, the analysis will now turn to a focused examination of the temporal dimension of sustainability, seeking to elucidate how time – future - shapes and challenges the very notion of what it means to sustain.

3. On the Threshold of Sustainability

The relationship between the present and the future, as articulated and enabled by the threshold, allows a reversal of the paradigm of Modernity.

As is well known, the modern conception of constant and unstoppable progress has long shaped the acquisition of knowledge[38]. The belief that every aspect of existence could, in principle, be mastered

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[36] See Nancy (2001). For an in-depth analysis of this aspect, see also Todorov (1991) and Chiodi (1992).
[37] See Nancy (2002).
[38] See Adorno – Horkheimer (1966).

through reason gave rise to a specific understanding of the present[39]: the present came to be seen as a dominant category, capable of explaining everything – a veritable hermeneutic key for interpreting both past and future. In this configuration, the present was elevated to the status of an autonomous and self-legitimizing explanatory principle. However, the predictive capacity attributed to this all-encompassing present soon proves inadequate. The promise of infinite growth collapses in the face of limited material and immaterial resources, and the increasingly complex entanglements between humans and their environments demand a reorientation of relational modes and the normative frameworks governing them[40]. The *hic et nunc* – which once guided and ultimately overshadowed human existence since late Modernity - is displaced by representations focused on the future, concerned above all with ensuring its very possibility.

In this shift, the present no longer occupies a privileged epistemological position[41]. Rather than being defined by present-oriented dispositive logics, the future emerges as the *locus* from which the conditions of the present are redefined. The present thus loses its primacy, and the future is no longer conceived as a mere projection of the present, but instead as a space – or, to continue the metaphor developed here, a threshold – from which new directions may be imagined and pursued.

Within this framework, sustainability aligns precisely with the imperative for transformation; indeed, it constitutes the most structured and coherent attempt to respond to the need to move in alternative directions - ones capable of fostering and securing a model of progress and growth that is attentive to, and accountable for, the future. Sustainability thus emerges not merely as a normative or strategic principle, but as a paradigm shift that challenges the extractive, present-centered logic of modern development[42].

As noted at the outset, the concept of sustainability has given rise to a range of definitions, often divergent and not always coherent. Although originally rooted in concerns about the environment, the notion has gradually expanded to encompass economic and social dimensions as well. These three pillars - environmental, economic, and social – have necessitated efforts to balance often competing demands, a task that proves far from straightforward[43]. This complexity both obscures a clear and precise understanding of what qualifies as "sustainable" and weakens the practical applicability of the concept, thereby undermining the effectiveness of related policy initiatives. These are, evidently, intricate issues. Yet they reveal that, despite the broad semantic scope and definitional plurality associated with sustainability, a forward-looking orientation remains a defining feature of the concept.

Indeed, the temporal dimension is fundamental for grasping the dynamics that underlie the development and implementation of sustainable practices and frameworks. Sustainability, in fact, identifies strategies, informs decision-making, and encourages behaviors aimed at safeguarding the essential conditions for human well-being from a long-term perspective[44]. The future to which sustainability refers functions metaphorically as a horizon of meaning – a direction toward which to move – and encompasses the possible pathways and trajectories that may be explored. At the same time,

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[39] See Weber (2001).
[40] See Jonas (2009).
[41] See in this sense, Luhmann (1976).
[42] In this perspective, see Sen (2010) and (2017).
[43] In this perspective it has been pointed out: "*Sustainability remains an open concept with a myriad interpretations and context-specific understanding*". See Purvis et al. (2019: 681). See also: Redclift (1993); Sammadar (2011); Ehrenfelf (2008).
[44] See Latour (2018).

it is precisely these pathways and trajectories that render the future itself possible. This is the fundamental challenge that the document drafted in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development – widely known as the Brundtland Report – sought to address[45].

The Brundtland Report played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse on sustainability by framing it within a future-oriented temporal perspective. It initiated a trajectory that has since become increasingly refined and enriched over time yet continues to serve as the conceptual backbone of sustainability. The Report's evocative title, *Our Common Future*, is particularly noteworthy. Structured around the possessive pronoun *our*, the formulation suggests that the future is something that can be claimed or appropriated, that it belongs to us and is therefore within our sphere of agency.

This appropriative framing carries significant implications: it implies that through deliberate choices and practices, we can shape the future and bring it into being. In this sense, the future is portrayed less as an open-ended or indeterminate horizon and more as the outcome of present actions: it ends up becoming a product of intentionality enacted in the here and now. The predictive capacity attributed to the present thus translates into a dispositive power over its effects; consequently, the future evoked in this framework is a *future of the present*: a future that depends on us, and is, in this very sense, *ours*[46].

The idea of the future as something appropriable - that is, of something that does not yet exist but can nonetheless be claimed - presents, quite evidently, a problematic configuration[47]. This conception aligns with the epistemological framework of modern rationality which, as previously noted, operates on the premise that, in principle, nothing escapes the grasp of reason. Consequently, even the domain of the possible, the *not-yet*, is subject to the rationalizing and ordering power of the present.

Yet, this view entails a significant epistemic risk: the future becomes articulated within the semantics of the present. It is reduced to a predictable projection, folded into the anticipatory logic of contemporary governance, and thereby absorbed by the present's dispositive structures. In such a framework, the future is no longer a space of open potentiality, but rather the product of a predatory present[48]. This representation of the future corresponds to what Reinhart Koselleck observed, that is to say the fact that modernity collapses the distinction between the *space of experience* and the *horizon of expectation*, thereby subordinating the future to the norms and knowledge of the present[49]. The future becomes, in this sense, "always already" written within the present, emptied of its defining indeterminacy[50]. Bent and shaped by the imperatives of the present, the future would be rendered its mere product.

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[45] A more expanded analysis on this point has been outlined in Borrello - Videtta (2023: 17-29). The considerations presented in the following pages reconsider and summarize the reasoning therein.

[46] For a critical perspective, see Waldenfels (2012); see also Id. (2011).

[47] In this perspective, Jonas proposes to re-think the traditional paradigm of ethics; see Jonas (1973: 31-54).

[48] See Stiegler (2020: 15). He defines this approach as the "Planetary Hybris" which still characterizes most of our understanding and cognition.

[49] Koselleck (2004).

[50] Niklas Luhmann, for instance, emphasized the radical contingency of the future and the impossibility of its full rational control, stressing instead the need for systems to adapt through mechanisms of "expectation under uncertainty." See Luhmann (1998).

This interpretation appears increasingly dissonant when measured against the profound uncertainty that marks our postmodern condition[51]. And yet, such tension may be resolved by shifting the focus from an 'appropriative' understanding of the future to one centered on *subjectivation*. Rather than seeking to own or control the future, this perspective foregrounds the ethical and political work of becoming a subject *with* and *toward* the future. In this light, the notion of the *threshold,* as discussed in the previous section, proves particularly effective. It allows us to conceptualize the future not as a domain to be seized and predetermined, but as a generative space of transformation, a liminal zone where new directions can be envisioned and inhabited[52].

The impetus underlying the Brundtland Report calls for a fundamental reversal in the way we conceive of the future - and of ourselves *within* the future. Its primary aim is not merely to forecast or manage what lies ahead, but rather to preserve the very *possibility* of the future as such. This objective demands an ethical reorientation centered on an 'open subjectivity': one capable of welcoming and incorporating a future conceived not as a linear extension of the present, but as an irruptive alterity, a space of otherness that *itself* disposes and conditions the decisions to be made.

More consistent with the normative horizon of the Brundtland Report - as well as subsequent sustainability frameworks - is the idea that the future should govern the present, rather than the reverse. In this perspective, the often-invoked expression that the present must "take charge of the future" appears increasingly inadequate. Such a formulation risks reaffirming the dominance of the present, reducing the future to an object of rational management and strategic planning. What is needed instead is an inversion of this representational logic: the future, understood as an open field of possibilities, must be allowed to intervene in and reshape the modes of representing, organizing, and inhabiting the present.

After all, the need for a reformulation of subjectivity in the terms of openness has accompanied ethical theoretical elaborations since the last century, particularly those of a phenomenological matrix. Without dwelling on the specificities traceable in the different contributions, it is important to note how the hermeneutic device of 'openness' leaves intact the significant scope expressed by the reference to the future, but at the same time allows for the identification of the space of meaning of a collective subject, captured precisely in the "diachrony of a future that inhabits it"[53]. This reversal entails a recognition that the present exists in a condition of '*indebtedness*'[54] to the future or, more precisely, in a state of '*ethical and temporal dependency*'.

It is within this framework that the notion of the '*common*' in *Our Common Future* finds its full meaning: "our future" is, in fact, 'common' in the sense that it binds us together. The term 'common' conveys a unifying meaning: this shared condition gives rise to a *we*, grounded in the recognition of an essential co-belonging. Such a qualification reveals the inescapable bond that connects each of us to

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[51] As well known, by the analysis of Jean-François Lyotard (1979), "Postmodernity" consists in the renunciation of Grand narratives, and the consequent acceptance of the precarious condition of all cognitive acquisition. This has led to the recognition of our times as "liquid," according to Baumann's well-known formulation. See Baumann (1999). On the specifics of the relativistic approach see also, among many, Vattimo (2009).

[52] Giorgio Agamben's reflection on temporality (especially through the notion of *kairos* and the idea of the threshold) invites us to rethink time not as a linear progression to be mastered, but as a discontinuous, interruptive space in which new subjectivities and forms of life can emerge. See Agamben (2009).

[53] See Menga (2021: 27).

[54] See in this sense: Hénaff (2018). See also: Esposito (2008:116 ff.)

one another, within a framework that understands relationality as inherently co-constitutive[55]. It implies recognizing oneself as an integral part of a whole: a collective to which one not only belongs but also actively contributes.

In fact, we inhabit an increasingly interconnected world, where geographic and cultural boundaries are ever more permeable, and where the practical consequences of individual decisions often extend far beyond the immediate sphere of the agent who makes them[56]. For this reason, the *we* evoked here cannot be confined to a local or national scale; rather, it must be situated within a global horizon. The notion of a common future, then, presupposes and demands a global ethic of co-responsibility; it implies an acknowledgment that our actions are embedded in a relational network whose effects transcend borders and generations alike. This very notion of 'globality' further specifies itself by extending to include those who are not yet present. Thus, our shared future appears to more accurately signify a 'future in common'. The significant difference between these two expressions lies in the dimension of relational potentiality, positing a "we" that transcends not only spatial boundaries but also temporal ones. It thus involves not only those who are present but also those who are yet to come, embodying an open subjectivity capable of welcoming and including the other who is not yet - the future other, the *next*. This highlights a key feature of the envisaged shared future: its essentially open character, which is reflected in a form of subjectivity that is itself fundamentally open.

Thus, the unifying significance of the threshold is found: a space that enables a distinction-relation, which does not assimilate but rather allows for passage within the dynamics of alterity. In this perspective, the injunction "not to satisfy our needs to the detriment of the impoverishment of our successors" reveals its legitimacy.

The reference to the metaphor of the threshold helps to elucidate the meaningful scope of the definition of sustainability proposed in the Brundtland Report: "*sustainable development is about meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". This definition emphasizes the importance of considering social, economic, and environmental factors in a balanced and integrated manner *for this generation and the generations to come.*

However, there are many important and complex questions regarding the intergenerational aspect of sustainability and the challenges it poses. Sustainability requires us to consider the needs and well-being of both the present and future generations; it involves an ethical dimension that extends beyond immediate self-interest and requires us to take responsibility for the well-being of future individuals. But for why should one bear a cost, which confers benefits on others (posterity)?[57] And to what extent can such a cost be called acceptable? How to be sure that what matters to us corresponds to future generations expectations? And again, how to be sure that such preservative choices succeed in meeting the needs of a growing future?[58]

Determining the acceptable costs and benefits, as well as identifying the priorities and needs of future generations, is indeed a complex task. It involves weighing different values, interests, and

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[55] See Weil S. (1949).

[56] See Sen A. (2017: 269).

[57] See Barry, B. (1999: 72). The 'future generations' constitute also a problematic issue by a legal point of view, in terms of rights; see on this aspect Greco (2018); Bifulco (2008).

[58] For an in-depth analysis of this aspect, see Borrello (2023: 11-13). In this perspective, see also: Veca (2006) and Ball (1985).

potential trade-offs in a pluralistic and evolving context. They need the identification of criteria for a rational justification[59].

The concerns raised regarding the hierarchization of values, the impact of population growth on quality of life, and the rational justification of choices are indeed crucial. They touch upon ethical, social, and political dimensions that demand thorough analysis and informed decision-making. Nevertheless, as important as these aspects are, they fall outside the scope of the present inquiry. For the purposes of the argument developed thus far, it appears equally valuable to approach the question of sustainability through the lens of the relational modalities it entails. By shifting the focus from *"the problem concerning the content of everyone's values, to the coexistence, in the same society, of people with different values"*, it becomes possible to question and overcome the competitive logic between values, drawing on the capacity of sustainability to produce coexisted place (the threshold we are referring to) that properly is disposed and created by the future. The characteristic of this "future", undoubtedly challenging and difficult, implies reorganizing the relationship between the present and the future focusing on the latter, bringing together actors who have distinct and conflicting interests and who do not occupy equal positions.

Indeed, the bond between individuals that forms the collective "we" can be seen as a shared accountability for the choices and actions that shape our common future. This accountability implies a responsibility not to determine the future in advance but to engage in an open and inclusive dialogue about its multiple possibilities.

By conceiving subjectivity as *"a normative and evaluating we"*[60], we recognize the collective nature of decision-making and emphasize the continuous and participatory aspect of evaluating choices. This understanding acknowledges that decision-making legitimacy lies in the ongoing engagement and participation of individuals in shaping their shared future.

The notion of responsibility for the future involves an ongoing and dynamic process of reflection, evaluation, and decision-making. It requires continuously reconsidering choices, values, and priorities considering changing circumstances and evolving knowledge. Sustainability, therefore, can be seen as a *"dynamic evolutionary process"*[61] that necessitates constant re-evaluation and adaptation.

The challenges inherent in the concept of sustainability compel us to move beyond the illusion that it is possible to design, in the present, definitive pathways for the future. It is necessary, on the one hand, to acknowledge that we are bound to remain within a condition of uncertainty, and on the other, to engage this uncertainty productively. This entails relinquishing the ambition to rationally weigh and hierarchize values and principles in a fixed and enduring manner and instead embracing the need for their continual redefinition[62].

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[59] As it has been pointed out: *"Accettare l'idea del paniere pluralistico di valori e criteri per la giustificazione non esclude la possibilità di ordinamenti tra valori"*. In particular, Salavtore Veca affirms how it is not impossible to reach an understanding of priorities and how to pursue them, if we recognize the essential incompleteness of such arrangements. See Veca (1989: 9).

[60] See Maffettone (1989: 37).

[61] See Capra, F. (2006: 336).

[62] See Sen, A. (2009). See also Benhabib (2008: 99) where she conceptualizes the legitimation of decision-making processes through the notion of "democratic iteration".

From a theoretical perspective, this representation of sustainability resonates with the notion of "concrete universalism" [63], a universal dimension that does not take the form of an abstract, static, and immutable universalism. Rather, it is shaped as an open-ended framework, continuously subject to revision, redefinition, and reassessment. In this sense, it offers a form of protection that is incomplete yet effective - or, in other words, genuinely sustainable. In sum, the notion of a "future in common" emphasizes the collective responsibility and accountability that underpin our choices and actions [64]. It calls for an ongoing dialogical engagement that takes into account diverse perspectives and fosters collaborative efforts aimed at maintaining the possibility of the future as such, with its multiple possibilities and carrying uncertainty.

4. Conclusion

The metaphor of the threshold brings into focus the intrinsically open and dynamic nature of sustainability-related choices, both normative and practical. As a spatial and symbolic figure, the threshold signifies a liminal zone, a space of possibility where a shared horizon can be negotiated without collapsing difference into uniformity [65]. It offers a conceptual framework within which intersubjective relations may be configured not as fixed or hierarchical, but as provisional, responsive, and always in the making [66]. In this sense, it resists any attempt to frame the future within the static and often restrictive terms dictated by present interests. Instead, it gestures toward a future that remains open - structurally and ethically - to revision, transformation, and responsibility.

This conceptual space invites us to rethink the very idea of a collective subject. In fact, the notion of a "we" that sustainability demands cannot be grounded in essentialist or exclusionary logics. Rather, it must be understood as a constantly renegotiated and contingent formation, rooted in practices of

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[63] This formulation was proposed by François Jullien, who offers the following definition: "*Un universale ribelle, che non è mai appagato; o, potremmo dire, un universale che distrugge la comodità di qualunque positività immobile: che non totalizza (ossia che non satura) ma che invece rende nuovamente consapevoli del fatto che ogni totalità compiuta ha qualche mancanza. Un universale regolatore (nel senso dell'idea kantiana) che, non essendo mai soddisfatto, non smette di spingere più in là l'orizzonte e induce indefinitamente a cercare*". See Jullien, F. (2018: 24).

[64] A significant contribution in this regard is offered by Sen (1997) and (2017).

[65] It is worth emphasizing that the implications of this representation extend beyond the theoretical domain and prove to be particularly productive. From an anthropological perspective, it has been argued that a critical approach to the concept of a common world, conceived as a universalizing ontological gesture, leads to the recognition of a *pluriverse* (Blaser & de la Cadena, 2018), within which it becomes possible to engage in practices "*for being emplaced with others, in divergence*" (Blaser, 2025: 184). Within this framework, reimagining the 'common' as *communing*, that is, "*as a process of creating and nurturing community*", entails acknowledging a mode of mutual interiority whereby "*the commons and the uncommons give meaning to each other and, as importantly, they incite each other as active principles, thus producing an oscillation that takes place in time*" (Blaser & de la Cadena, 2017: 186, 190). I am grateful to the reviewer of this article for drawing my attention to this perspective.

[66] See Young, I.M. (1990).

mutual recognition and ethical responsiveness[67]. It is a "we" grounded in relationality[68] – a form of subjectivity that is not autonomous and self-contained, but constituted through and by the other, including the other who is not yet present: the next, the not-yet.

Such a perspective resonates with Judith Butler's reflections on relationality and vulnerability[69]. Butler emphasizes that subjectivity is not a self-grounding entity but emerges through social and affective bonds - bonds that expose us to one another, and that condition our political and ethical obligations. Sustainability, viewed through this lens, is not merely about preserving resources or managing risks; it is about sustaining the very conditions of relational life, including those lives and futures that remain unrepresented or not yet conceivable[70]. For this reason, an approach that takes into account the diversity of political ontologies appears particularly relevant, both in relation to what Mario Blaser describes as the *tangle of collectives* that characterizes the vital forms of existence on Earth[71], and with regard to the divergences that are embedded in, yet still unexpressed within, the space of the future.

In this context, Joan Tronto's concept of a *democracy of care* becomes particularly salient[72]. Care, for Tronto, is not confined to the private realm but constitutes a political ethic capable of reorganizing our priorities and institutional practices. Living in common, as she suggests, entails a shared attentiveness to needs, interdependencies, and vulnerabilities; in other terms, she outlined a framework that revitalizes democratic life in its most fundamental sense. This vision of care as a constitutive element of democratic life finds a compelling parallel in the metaphor of the threshold, which challenges us to conceive sustainability not as a finite goal to be achieved, but as an ongoing, relational practice, open to difference, rooted in care, and oriented toward a future that is both unknown and

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[67] See Blaser, M. (2025). Drawing on a notion of *pluriverse* as "*constantly self-realizing existents and collectives*", the concept of place "*primarily refers to the spatiotemporal point where the vital trajectories of a multiplicity of existents or, better, the relations that compose them, meet*" (2025: 15). In particular, the author argues that addressing global crises requires practices that are grounded in specific places: in this vein, he explores the practical implications of ontological divergence by examining the case of the Yshiro communities in the Chaco region (2025: 59–95) and concludes with a call to invent "viable small stories".

[68] The relevance of the relational dimension in the definition of the concept of identity has been at the centre of multiple philosophical reflections: see, among others, Levinas E., (1980: 257-298); Pareyson (1970: 38 ff); Ricœur (1993). From a legal-philosophical perspective, Sergio Cotta, in this sense, notes how "*the most elementary empirical observation shows the irrepressible relationality of persons*" which, in Heideggerian terms, implies recognizing how our being (Dasein) is a being-with, or *co-being* (Mit-dasein); see Cotta (1989: 80). From a different perspective, but similarly, Mario Ricca states, "*[identity] is a relational phenomenon that springs from the flux of relations in which the subject is immersed*"; see Ricca (2008: 259).

[69] See Butler (2006).

[70] This orientation echoes Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy, in which responsibility for the other precedes the formation of the self; see Levinas, E. (1980). It also draws on Paul Ricœur's idea of the *ethical intention*, the desire to live well with and for others in just institutions; see Ricœur (1993). It seems worthy to also mention Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on *being-with*, where community is not a fusion of identities but an exposure to shared finitude and co-existence; see Nancy (2014).

[71] In particular, the author claims: "*In this respect, cosmopolitics (and the related idea of the pluriverse) resonates with recent efforts, often subsumed under the label of the 'ontological turn in anthropology', to grapple with the ethnographic puzzle of counterfactual utterances without taking modern ontological assumptions for granted, as classical ethnographies did. The underlying premise in these efforts is that, far from signaling that the ethnographers and their interlocutors have different perspectives on a common world, the ethnographic puzzle makes evident that at stake in it are different ontologies or worlds*". See Blaser, M. (2025: 9).

[72] See Tronto, J. (2013).

shared[73]. It asks us to remain attuned to the unfinished character of the world and to act within it not from a place of certainty, but rather in the willingness to "*stay with the trouble*", as the title of Haraway's work aptly signals[74]. In other words, it demands an ethics of responsibility and co-presence.

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[73] From this perspective, Donna Haraway's notion of *tentacular thinking* proves particularly useful, as it entails a non-hierarchical, networked understanding of interdependence. She claims: "Tentacularity is about life lived along lines – and such a wealth of lines – not at points, not in spheres. "The inhabitants of the world, creature of all kinds, human and non-human, are wayfarers"; generations are like "a series of interlaced trails". String figures all" (2016: 32).

[74] Haraway invites us to reframe the ecological crisis as an opportunity to enact collective practices of responsible response, articulating an ethics of *being-with* through the concept of *sympoiesis*, that is, through distributed and collaborative processes of co-creation. In this regard, she states: "Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it" (2016: 58).

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