

Sustainable Development and Human Rights: Christianity as Mediator

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Abstract. This paper aims to show that there is a tension if not a total contradiction, between the notion of sustainable development and the idea of human rights and that Christianity, especially as practiced by Filipinos, can be a starting point for a reflection of a reconciliation of the tension. The paper is divided into four parts. First, a short inquiry into the origin of sustainable development will be made, and it will be shown that sustainable development is closely related to environmentalism. That is to say, caring for the environment is a crucial point of discussion when talking about sustainable development. In the second part, a discussion on human rights will be conducted, especially on human rights, understood as subjective rights usually spoken of using proprietary language. That is to say, human rights are conceived as property. In the third part, it will be shown that sustainable development, understood in tandem with environmentalism, is in tension with the notion of human rights, especially when conceived as subjective rights. The contradiction is usually most apparent in the legal and juridical sphere, and three cases will be given in this regard. In the last part, it is asserted that it is possible to attempt to give some semblance of reconciliation between the two notions above in tension by showing how the specific brand of Christianity practiced by Filipinos, especially as guided by Christian Philosophy, can help least in the theoretical level. It should be noted that what is asserted is not a full-blown solution to the tension. Indeed, Filipino Christianity can only be a starting point of reflection for the reconciliation.

Keywords: Sustainable development; Environmentalism; Human rights; Subjective rights; Filipino; Christianity.

1.0 Introduction

The respective notions of human rights and sustainability are not without issues. It has been argued, for example, whether rights can be properly defended as something universal, inalienable, and exist regardless of legal systems or not. This is the mainstream view on rights. Donnelly and Whelan (1989/2020), for example, defend the view that rights are inalienable. Griffin (2008) and Gewirth (1996) associate rights with autonomy and agency. Gould (2004) and Nussbaum (2000) defend the view that rights pertain to active capacities to exercise ourselves viz., rights as positive freedom. Furthermore, Gilabert (2018) defends the view that rights are associated with dignity. However, Lacroix and Panchere (2016/2018), and Mutua (2002) are among those who are skeptical of such a notion of rights. Indeed, rights seem merely to be a social construct that arises as a consequence of society. When such a social construct becomes associated with autonomy and freedom, human rights then begin to emphasize the individual.

On the other hand, sustainability and sustainable development seem to emphasize the social dimension. Sustainability aims to facilitate human co-existence with fellow humans and other organisms on the Earth

throughout long periods (Ben et al., 2019). The terms sustainability and sustainable development are often used to mean the same thing: long-term accommodation of the welfare of inhabitants of the Earth, which can be approached at an institutional level through social, economic, and environmental interventions (Meadowcroft, 2024). UNESCO (2015) might distinguish between the two, with the former being about the long-term goal and the latter about the process to achieve that goal. However, using these terms interchangeably for our purposes would be helpful.

If human rights are individual and sustainability social, then a contradiction seems apparent. However, the concord between human rights and sustainable development appears presupposed. For example, the United Nations (UN), on July 28, 2022, adopted a resolution that recognized the universal right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (United Nations, 2022). Furthermore, back in 2015, the UN (2015) also adopted the *17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), which reference human rights in relation to sustainable development. Indeed, sustainable development always involves environmental issues. This link between environmentalism and sustainable development seems to be the impetus for the UN resolution, recognizing the universal right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. It seems, however, that things are not so simple, and that there is more to be said about the relation between human rights and sustainability, especially sustainability conceived as involving environmentalism and environmental sustainability.

Dr. Siobhan McNerney-Lankford, a Senior Counsel at the World Bank and an expert in international human rights law, explains that “the MDGs overlapped with economic and social rights, but neglected civil and political rights” (McNerney-Lankford, 2017). The MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) are the UN’s development goals for its members, which are targeted to be fulfilled by the year 2015. It is the precursor of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). After 2015, the MDGs were later on replaced by SDGs. Lankford sees that the parallel spheres of human rights and development, that is to say, their divergence, was just as ignored in the SDGs as much as it was in the MDGs. This reflects, Lankford writes, “the fragmentation of international law and the absence of international policy coherence between human rights and development” (McNerney-Lankford, 2017). This divergence between human rights and sustainability is already apparent in Dovers and Handmer (1993), who find a contradiction, among others, between economic growth and ecological limits and between the interests of the individual and the collective.

Furthermore, as Kuhlman and Farrington (2010) discussed, there is a conflict between concerns for welfare, viz., human rights, and environmental protection, which is hidden in current discussions on sustainability. In other words, because sustainability also includes environmental concerns, there is a contradiction between such a notion and human rights. Indeed, when sustainable development is understood in tandem with environmentalism, its contradiction with human rights becomes clearer. Anton and Shelton (2011) show this conflict by arguing that sustainability’s endeavors to consider both human rights and environmental concerns necessarily make it conflict with itself. On the ethical level, this contradiction is manifested in the harassment of environmentalists who insist that notions of private property and profits, which are understood as rights, cannot precede environmental concerns following sustainability (Clark, 2013). This tension is also detected in Kerri Woods’ *Human Rights and Environmental Sustainability* (2010) where she observes that if human rights and environmental sustainability are in tension with one another, then it may also be the case that “‘sustainable development’ is itself beset with tensions.” (p.1).

This paper wishes to examine this tension, that is, this tension between sustainable development conceived as related to environmental sustainability and human rights, but especially human rights understood as subjective rights. Human rights, when conceived as subjective rights seem to be expressed in proprietary language. Nigel Biggar (2020) thus describes subjective right as a right which is a kind of property which one possesses, which belongs to a subject, and which, through appeal to authority, requires that others act or refrain from acting. With this conception, the tension between human rights and environmental sustainability now seems apparent: environmental sustainability seems to impose limits to human rights as subjective rights even when human rights cannot seem to recognize this limit.

There are many approaches to this tension. One can, for instance, insist that human rights and environmentalism have no contradiction and that a proper understanding of human rights should always include environmental

rights (Sachs, 2004). However, this runs counter to the problem already laid bare: rights are often understood in terms of autonomy and the individual. This makes it so that rights are understood as subjective rights. However, the concerns of the individual may run counter to environmental concerns. One can also challenge the idea of universal human rights and insist on prioritizing culture and environment (Freeman, 1996). However, in this case, one will have to give up human rights in favor of local notions of sustainability and environmental concerns. Perhaps one need not abandon human rights, sustainable development, or environmentalism altogether. One needs to look at human rights and sustainable development in terms of hierarchy to prioritize one over the other in cases of conflict (Shelton, 2012). It may also be possible to look at the conflict between human rights and sustainability as a package deal, thus sustaining the conflict between the two (Woods, 2010). This paper aims to contribute to the discussion on the conflict between human rights and sustainability.

The researcher proposes a religiously inspired alternative and discusses the advantages of such an alternative. Religious approaches to the problem are not wanting. It can be shown, for example, that religion can narrate an alternative system wherein there is no contradiction between rights and environmentalism, and therefore, no contradiction between human rights and sustainability precisely because God has harmoniously made humans and nature (Newcomb, 2023). Indeed, a Christian worldview can justify environmental activism (Nita, 2016). This paper gives an alternative that relies on reading human rights as objective rights instead of subjective. The notion of objective rights is the original way in which rights theorists thought about rights and justice (Strauss, 1953). It will then be shown how the notion of rights conceived as objective (instead of subjective) is already manifest in the cultural and political sphere through the psyche of the Filipino Christian. In other words, Filipino Christianity seems already to be operating under the idea of objective rights. This will then be shown to be a good starting point for reflection on the possibility of coherence between human rights, now conceived as objective, and environmental sustainability, and, therefore, sustainable development in general.

2.0 Methodology

This study is purely qualitative and employs simple conceptual and textual analysis to analyze how sustainability is always understood with environmentalism. Journal articles and books, and especially contributions by the United Nations and other institutional authorities concerning sustainability and environmentalism are consulted. As shown in Kerri, Clark, Shelton, Anton, and others, sustainability is always associated with environmental concerns. In particular, Adam's *Green Development: Environment and Sustainability in the Third World* demonstrates the relationship between sustainability and environmentalism. However, these environmental concerns also run counter to the idea of rights. Thus, texts that analyze this conflict between rights and sustainability, understood in tandem with environmentalism, will be examined. These texts will be journal articles from academic journals engaged with the issue of environmentalism and sustainability, such as, among others, *Sustainability Science*, *Environmental Sciences*, *Sustainability Sciences*, *Journal of Sustainable Development*, *Law & Policy*, and *Environmental Conservation*. Because human rights are also associated with the legal sciences, journals such as, among others, *Erasmus Law Review* and *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* are also engaged. In particular, one journal article and four books are examined in this part.

Following the Continental Philosophical mode of reflection, the researcher will show that human rights as subjective rights conflict with sustainability as currently understood. Because the researcher follows the Continental Philosophical tradition, philosophical texts employed will be those written by continental philosophers. Since continental philosophy approaches philosophical problems with particular emphasis on culture, history, and a more immanent mode of reflection, this paper will examine the works of theorists such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Leo Strauss, Nigel Biggar, and John Milbank. Hence, a philosophical recovery of the idea of human rights as objective rights in light of those mentioned above will be employed to ease the tension between human rights and sustainability. In particular, Leo Strauss' *Natural Right and History* is read as a critical text that engages with the history of rights as objective rights. In criticizing the contemporary idea of rights as subjective rights, I employ the thought of Biggar's *What's With Rights?* and Milbank's "Against Human Rights: Liberty in the Western Tradition." Overall, this part of the paper examined three articles and six books.

The understanding of rights as subjective rights creates conflicts at the practical level. The researcher will examine three cases demonstrating the tensions between rights and sustainable development conceived in tandem with environmentalism. These will be cases from Nigeria and Europe. However, the most relevant is the third case,

which examines a predicament concerning rights and sustainable development in the Philippine islands. Austin and Eder show this conflict in their article “Environmentalism, Development, and Participation on Palawan Island, Philippines.” In this section, five articles and two books were examined.

The critical theoretical and exegetical move here will be to bring in a philosophic-theological narrative, but in particular, Filipino Christian thought and spirituality, and show how this tradition, i.e., Filipino Christian thought and spirituality, already possesses the germ of the reconciliation between sustainability understood in tandem with environmentalism, and human rights now construed as objective. As already mentioned, what is attempted here is not a full-blown solution, but a new starting point for reflections on the reconciliation of sustainability and human rights. Thus, articles from journals concerning spirituality and religion are engaged, such as, among others, *Religions*, *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*. In this section, four articles and three books were examined.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Sustainable Development and Environmentalism

The concept of sustainability can be traced back to the Chinese thought of ‘*Heaven and People in One*’ (Longyu Shi et al., 2019). Already, sustainability is understood concerning environmental degradation, where, especially in the Zhou Dynasty (1000-771 B.C.), the Chinese Emperors saw that it was more appropriate to use natural resources without overexploiting them. In various other civilizations like the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman ones, some degrees of environmental degradation of human making from activities such as logging, mining, etc. were observed (Pisani, 2006). Indeed, ancient authors including Plato, Pliny the Elder, and Columella are well aware of these environmental issues brought about by human activity. Columella, 4 A.D. – 70 A.D. (1941), for example, tells us that the tragedies of nature, which inevitably affect human conditions, are brought about by humans themselves. For Columella, humans must try to figure out ways to reduce environmental degradation by practicing more sustainable methods.

By the 18th century, ideas about human progress began to flourish. However, this also meant that there were concerns about whether our resources would be able to keep up with the ongoing progression. In particular, there is the already well-known essay of the English economist and cleric Thomas Malthus (2018/1798) on population entitled *An Essay on the Principle of Population* where he posits that human improvements necessarily lead to population increase, which brings the danger of an increase which might be beyond the world’s capacity for subsistence. Further reflections and concerns on human progress were seen in the proceeding century. The 19th-century English philosopher and political theorist best known for his utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill, also wrote about the progressive society. For Mill (2004/1848), progressive society is characterized by humanity’s increasing power of dominating nature, but this domination will ultimately lead to what he calls the *stationary state*. It should be noted, however, that the stationary state, for Mill, is not necessarily a state where humans suffer, as opposed to the dystopian tone of Malthus’ economic theory on the end of progress. For Mill, the stationary state is simply the state where progress stops but where people are still fulfilled due to a balance of resources and population. What can be learned from Malthus and Mill is the necessity of means to continue development whilst also avoiding the over-exploitation of nature and the environment since it is from these that humans get their subsistence.

The term sustainability originated from the idea of responsible use of natural resources. As is well known, the German mining administrator and tax accountant Carl Von Carlowitz was the first to use the term sustainability (*nachhaltende nutzung*—sustainable use) to encourage a balanced use of forest resources, especially trees. For Carlowitz, humanity must take proper care of trees. Enough seedlings should be planted in logging timber to replace those cut for timber.

By the 20th century, William Adams (1990) could already affirm this close connection between sustainable development and environmental concern in Europe and America. Adams delineated this idea in history in eight themes. In his *Green Development: Environment and Sustainability in the Third World*, Adams says that these eight themes overlap in time, and expound on the historical link between environmentalism and sustainable development. Three themes seem most relevant to the present discussion and should be enough to drive our point here. First, on nature preservation and the emergence of sustainable development. Adams argues that sustainable

development thinking is rooted in wildlife conservation. He observes that some motives for conservation include the idea that conservation allows resources to be appropriated as capital, and as a source for revenue. Concerns over environmental degradation were also a motivation (Adams, 1990).

Another theme explicated by Adams, and which will also be discussed here, is ecology and the balance of nature. Ecology developed as a science towards the end of the 19th century and is closely linked to environmentalism, especially since a lot of the prominent figures of environmentalism during that time were also scientists trained in ecology. This science of ecology allowed experts to give a scientific description of nature and the environment. This made it possible for sustainability to be calculated. This meant that fisheries, for example, could already tell when their harvest would already be an overexploitation of nature. The ideas at play here were equilibrium and stability, where both population and ecology must be managed to balance the two (Adams, 1990).

Finally, the third theme to be discussed here is ecology and economic development. Scientific developments in ecology and the ensuing revolution on the methods employed in resource harvesting to avoid exploitation meant that the technocrats involved in technological advancements of humanity have begun to explore ways to develop technology in an environmentally friendly way. Groups involved in such efforts include the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB). The idea is that lessons from ecology should not be ignored lest humanity suffers the consequences of over-exploiting nature (Adams, 1990). Thus, the paradigm for sustainable development thinking. It cannot be denied that sustainability necessarily involves environmentalism and environmental sustainability.

In 1987, the UN commissioned experts from developing and developed nations to develop long-term strategies for preserving the environment and continuing development. This group was called the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), or more famously, the Brundtland Commission. This commission then produced the Brundtland Report entitled *Our Common Future*. This report first defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.43). This formulation does not seem to have a direct mention of environmental sustainability. However, two bullets explain the point, with the second explaining that the environment sets some limitations on how society ought to think about progress.

However, the link between sustainable development and environmentalism and environmental sustainability became more explicit in the 1992 Earth Summit organized by the UN and hosted by Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. This conference aimed exactly at making advances on sustainability and environmentalism. This conference thus produced the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* which affirmed that “in order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it” (United Nations General Assembly, 1992, principle 4).

Hence, the above clearly shows that sustainable development should be understood with environmentalism and environmental sustainability. It also shows how concerns over sustainability and environmentalism have become the impetus for the declaration of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal human right.

3.2 Human Rights as Subjective Rights

Rights are now thought of in terms of proprietary language. In other words, a right is understood as some property. Nigel Biggar (2020) thus tells us that “[i]t is something that one possesses. It is a liberty claim that belongs to a subject (usually a person, though sometimes a corporate body), through which (s)he acquires the power, through appeal to moral or legal authority, to require others either to refrain from acting or to act (p.132). Biggar summarizes the problem of this conception of rights by enumerating radical individualism and moral subjectivism as its effects. In short, if rights are posited as subjective, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to see how an individual can transcend subjectivity and become subject to an objective moral order. This order orients everyone to the common good. This problem opens the space for justifying actions that do not contribute or are inimical to the common good.

However, rights talk was not always about subjective rights. As Thomas Mautner (2013) pointed out, subjective rights only became famous by the end of the 1970s. Indeed, Leo Strauss (1953), usually acknowledged to be the pioneer of historical research into rights, in his work *Natural Right and History*, argues that it is evident that there is a need for re-asserting the idea of natural rights, especially since they function to serve as an objective standard for right and wrong. For Strauss, without this objective standard, all would be left at the mercy of positive law, which means that what is moral is ultimately just determined by human courts. Here, it is clear that Leo Strauss had in mind the idea that rights should be viewed as an objective standard and is, therefore, objective. Here, there is no contradiction between the idea of common good and rights, for when right is thought to be based on human nature, then it seems that an individual may freely exercise his/her rights to the extent that human nature allows. Conversely, to the extent that human nature does not allow this or that action, then there are good reasons to coerce individuals into doing otherwise. Now, if human nature is the basis for rights, then it seems that what is good to one will be, in general, good to the many also: the common good.

Strauss (1953) himself reads the English political theorist of the *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes (1998/1651), as the originator of the idea of a politics of hedonism, which ultimately translates into a politics without objective standards. In contrast to Hobbes, the other English political theorist, John Locke, at least in Strauss, seems to be the one who was closest to establishing natural rights as appropriate standards for moral and political action. This contradiction between Locke and Hobbes demonstrates exactly how rights can begin to be regarded as subjective. To be sure, a historical genealogy of subjective rights points beyond Locke and Hobbes as originators. However, it will be beyond the scope of the present work to discuss the origins of subjective rights, which deserves to be treated as a separate topic.

(It should be noted here that Contemporary scholarship has shown that the idea of subjective rights has further origins in medieval Franciscan scholastic thought. William Ockham and his voluntarist metaphysics are often said to have contained the seeds of human and subjective rights. See for example, O'Donovan's (2003), "Rights, Law, and Political Community: A Theological and Historical Perspective; see also Brian Tierney's (1997) *The Idea of Natural Rights*. More recent scholarship has further explored with more precision the beginnings of subjective right in the notion of faculty or power of the 15th and 16th-century Pandectistic theologians. See Ana Caldeira Fouto's (2019), "Revisiting Subjectivity in Rights Theorists.")

For Hobbes (1998/1651), the purpose of human existence is self-preservation. The human being, at least for Hobbes, is intrinsically selfish and, therefore, naturally desires freedom and liberty but also dominion over others. Hence, the laws and the state should be designed to constrain man through reward, especially fear of punishment. Hobbes' idea of man as innately selfish is, for Strauss (1953), Hobbes' rejection of the traditional idea of man as a political being. Man, instead, is an a-political being. Thus, in Strauss' placement of Hobbes among the hedonists and the epicureans, Hobbes ultimately suggests that 'self-ownership,' that is to say, this innate drive for self-preservation, this same drive that motivates the want of reward and fear of punishment, is, in man, the most inalienable in the fullest sense of the word, about the state. (Milbank, 2012). Hence, it is apparent how subjective right and its problems proceed from this conception. If man is ultimately concerned with himself only, then thinking of the common good makes no sense. Indeed, Karl Marx (1978) makes the same observation when he posits that rights-talk is ultimately just egoism; humans, because of their rights, human beings are members of a community but belong to it precisely by being separated from it.

Indeed, subjectivism, egoism, and disregard for the common good seem to be the social and political translation of rights conceived as subjective. However, there seems to be a more pernicious political translation of the aforementioned. John Milbank (2012) sees that the ultimate guarantor of the right to self-preservation will be the state and that when conditions arise that will threaten the subjective right to self-preservation of many people, then the state and the sovereign become like the solipsistic individual, granting itself unlimited powers over the subjects as to be able to preserve itself, and therefore require draconian measures to guarantee itself its self-preservation. It is through this same reasoning that the Nazi jurist, Carl Schmitt, perversely approves of authoritarianism and dictatorship. (Milbank, 2012). In short, for Milbank, the liberalism practiced today, which is ultimately based on subjective rights, serves to be the analog for authoritarianism and dictatorship, the effects of which are horrors already replete in human history.

If humanity conceives of human rights, it must conceive of them as objective rather than subjective. This means that rights must be capable of orienting human actions toward the common good. As the researcher mentioned earlier, in the wake of Leo Strauss, if rights are to become objective, then the standard for rights would be human nature, and in so doing, it would be possible to orient humans towards the common good. It seems, however, that the notion of human nature is unclear. What exactly constitutes human nature? This shall be answered concerning the tension between human rights and sustainability in the fourth section of this paper. It seems that how rights are understood today is based on subjective rights. In the next section, the researcher will discuss how subjective rights play out in reality and how this creates tension between sustainability, environmentalism, and human rights.

3.3 The Tension Between Human Rights and Environmental Sustainability

It was mentioned earlier that sustainable development, which necessarily involves environmentalism and environmental sustainability, is closely related to human rights, in that human rights demand that it be universally recognized that everyone should have the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. In practice, the concord between human rights and sustainable development is not always evident. Indeed, certain actors often disregarded the concept of sustainable development when prioritizing micro-economic self-interests. In Europe, for example, there is an obvious problem in the agricultural sector: transnational corporations often can look for more sustainable and environmentally friendly methods and technologies but employ methods that are not necessarily environmentally friendly and can achieve the highest possible productivity. (Pietrewicz, 2021).

Another example can be seen in the Nigerian clash of ownership versus environmental rights. Sunday Bontur Lugard (2016) tells us that oil is considered a state property in Nigeria and is thus usually leased to other commercial entities such as International Oil Companies (OICs). Because of this, such commercial entities seem to have the right to these resources, even at the expense of the environment and host communities. The appropriate position here is to hold that these commercial entities, while exercising property rights, should recognize that rights over resources such as oil should be considered a collective property and, therefore, consider the various stakeholders in exercising such collective property. The OICs' interest in petroleum over the region should be tempered, if not overridden by concerns about pollution and health concerns, and its effects on biodiversity and climate change. (Lugard, 2016).

Here, the idea of subjective rights is clearly at play. Lugard's analysis of Nigerian ownership of resources relies on Locke's idea of the balance between the commons and private property. Lugard shows that in Locke, as was already read by Strauss, in contradistinction to Hobbes, the right over private property is not absolute, especially since our rights ought to be directed to the interest of all parties involved, in other words, the common good. (Lugard, 2016). However, as seen in the first case of transnational corporations choosing maximum productivity over environmental concerns and later in the OICs of Nigeria, the idea of rights is subjective, albeit implicitly. As shown in the second section, there is an analog between authoritarian states and the subjective individual. The same can be said of commercial entities composed of collective individuals. Because rights are something that proceeds subjectively, a person, but also an individual state or commercial entity, may pursue without limits what are perceived to be its best interests without regard for the common good. However, not only the state or other big entities find themselves in tension with sustainability. It could also be the case that small communities or even individuals can be in tension with sustainability.

For example, in a case analysis from the article *Human Rights Courts Interpreting Sustainable Development: Balancing Individual Rights and Collective Interest*, Emelie Folkesson (2013) relates the Fredin vs Sweden case in the European courts. In this case, the individual, Mr. Anders Fredin, seems to have violated environmental laws but within his property. (Fredin v. Sweden, 1991). This again demonstrates the tensions between rights, sustainable development, and environmentalism. The court's ruling favored the state of Sweden since, the court reasons, the state acted in the general interest of environmental protection.

Finally, the last example is relevant because it is a case from our Philippine islands. Rebecca Austin and James Eder (2007) present a case study in the Palawan island. In one of their three case studies, they relate how non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) efforts to address environmental concerns and livelihood among locals sometimes create tension with each other. This suggests that the interests of local communities are not always

concordant with environmental interests. In this case, the city government of Puerto Princesa ordered a ban on shifting cultivation as a forest conservation measure. This immediately caused the locals of Palawan hardships in terms of livelihood because they were pressured to look for a lot of non-timbre resources to compensate for their loss of income due to the ban above. Here, not so much property is the issue, but livelihood. The right to a good livelihood seems to have come in tension with sustainability and environmental concerns.

This is a contradiction that Kerri Woods (2010) has attempted to analyze. Woods relates that scholars of human rights and environmental sustainability have problematized that one cannot have both sustainability and human rights (individual freedom and democracy). There is, for example, Garrett Hardin (1968), who prioritizes sustainability over human rights. For Hardin (1968), coercion of the individual, violating the individual's supposed rights, is necessary if sustainability is to be achieved in the coming years. It is clear that Hardin shares Thomas Malthus' concerns, but he surpasses Malthus in his advocacy for coercive methods, methods that limit freedom and rights, to achieve sustainability.

On the other hand, Wilfred Beckerman (1999) thinks that this seemingly obsessive amount of care put into environmentalism and sustainability seems to have the effect of disregarding humans. Beckerman is distrustful of deep ecology literature, which seems to echo Hitler's introduction of legislation concerning reverence to the environment, which, at least for Beckerman, is a move towards the irrational and towards an abandonment of the humanist tradition which has dominated our thinking for more than a century already. Moreover, Beckerman (1999) seems to invoke the difficulties of Indigenous groups and little communities, which seem to have become victims of the difficult government ordinances, which, while environmentally concerned, do so at the expense of their livelihood.

Kerri Woods recognizes this tension and proposes her solution. Woods thinks that it is possible to think of Environmental Human Rights. Indeed, one can act as an environmental steward and seek to maintain the environment for future generations. In other words, environmental care does not need to contradict human rights; it must strengthen and affirm them. (Woods, 2010). For Woods, affirming human rights works like a package deal: it involves the recognition of sustainability as a crucial aspect of human rights and the good of society in general. Woods, however, points to some weakness in her position. For example, environmentalist sustainability activists might say that a package understanding of environmentalism also involves affirming human rights. However, in this case, environmentalism is given more emphasis, and therefore, the appeal of rights should be less universal than the appeal of environmentalism and sustainability. (Woods, 2010). This ultimately means that in cases where rights and environmental sustainability clash, the environment gets to have a more significant advantage over the affirmation of rights.

3.4 The Filipino Christian as Mediator

The researcher gives a different argument for easing human rights and sustainability tension. Indeed, it is only possible to speak of an easement because what the researcher proposes here is not a direct solution, one that would reconcile the contradictions mentioned above. The researcher only proposes to give a new perspective on how to think about human rights and sustainability understood in tandem with environmentalism and environmental sustainability. This involves thinking about human rights in terms of objective rights, which do not alienate the individual from others but rather orient them to a common good.

Here, the researcher follows Milbank in understanding objective rights as proper order about other things and not as an order that proceeds from subjectivity. In his reading, this kind of order ultimately means that there is an ultimate standard for order: God Himself, in whom our life and the universe's merely participate. Therefore, awareness of this participation of nature and us in the Divine, which is where Christian philosophy comes in, means that it should be possible to recognize the value in environmentalism while also affirming human rights, which, this time, are conceived as objective rights. This awareness of our participation in the Divine is already present in the Filipino psyche. The Filipino Christian is, therefore, a good starting point for the mediation between human rights and sustainable development, which, as already repeatedly said, necessarily involves environmentalism and environmental sustainability.

What constitutes human nature was asked in the second section of this paper. Here, the researcher follows Jacques Maritain (1949) in positing that human nature derives from the inherent dignity of persons. These best fit the picture of objective rights in that the dignity of persons justifies duties and relations between and among persons. If persons have inherent dignity, then it seems that no amount of subjectivity can give one the excuse not to look out for their (person's) best interests. As Milbank (2012) relates, this is the original meaning of *ius*, the usual Latin equivalent of right. Indeed, this is also how Thomas Aquinas understood ownership: ownership is not of the land itself, but a certain incorporeality of land, that is, that ownership means right distribution (*Summa*, II. II. q.66, a.1.). In other words, or so Milbank (2012) explains, "individual human beings *do not own* usage, but human beings in general *only own* usage." (p.214)

The idea of human nature deriving from human dignity can be further qualified. Kerri Woods (2010) thus traces the notion of human dignity back to Christian theology, where man is understood to be created in the image and likeness of God. Indeed, given this framework, proper distribution, indeed right relation, can be said to be a proper order set there by God, who orders everything according to His Being.

Here, the researcher makes the connection between God, who orders everything, and thus gives rise to rights as right order (objective rights). This endows dignity to things of the universe, especially nature and creation, to which human beings stand in relation. This means that humans also have duties towards nature and creation. Objective rights, then, necessarily abandon subjectivity and orient us to the common good but also orient us to specific duties humanity has towards creation. This is where sustainable development and environmental sustainability come into the picture. Sustainable development and environmental sustainability are humanity's duty towards creation, not simply as stewards, but as persons who, by claiming objective rights, also have duties towards that to which humans claim a right.

Christianity, especially Eastern Christianity, is conscious of the eminence of creation and nature. For example, in the writing of Eastern theologians, there is always a reference to the blessedness and holiness of creatures found in the natural world. (Gibbons, 2019). Indeed, the desert fathers, in their identification of the birds as a sign of God's holiness, fasted not so much as mortification but as a reminder for them that in due time, everything, including birds and animals, will once again be put in a *right relationship* with one another, as in the original paradise where the consumption of animal flesh did not occur. Here, it may be possible to avoid Beckerman's charge of mystifying nature in that nature is not regarded with a high status simply because of itself but because of the proper ordering which God himself sets upon the world with His Being as the Model.

This Eastern tendency is already evident in the Filipino psyche. First of all, as anecdotal evidence, a lot of Filipinos still believe in some supernatural influences not taught by the Christian faith. These supernatural influences influence us, and often, this translates into respect that humanity gives to nature (as when we, for example, say in Cebuano, "*tabi-tabi* when Cebuanos relieve themselves in grassy areas or *libon*). In the ordinary Filipino's life, this seems to deepen spiritual life. As Juan Macaranas (2021) relates, Filipinos practice religion as though God is not out there but right here, directly affecting our daily lives. For Macaranas (2021), this meant that, just like their Asian neighbors, Filipinos understood reality as a whole, where the self is not regarded as a completely separate entity (something which would not have been very obvious had the Filipinos been operating under the idea of subjective rights), but is an integral part of a bigger reality. Indeed, or so says Macaranas, "[i]f the early Filipinos accepted and integrated the Christian doctrines into their spirituality and religious beliefs, it is because they also see its connectedness with God." (p.8.)

This point about Filipino Christianity is further shown in Fides del Castillo's (2015) work on traditional Filipino religion and Catholicism. Castillo demonstrates that there are some clear similarities between traditional Filipino religion and Catholicism, and this made it very easy for the early Filipino pagans to accept Catholicism as a new religion from the Spaniards. This meant seeing the seeds of God's word in the indigenous practices was possible. This idea of the Filipino as belonging in a bigger whole, one in which God reigns, is evident even among young people. Indeed, as demonstrated by del Castillo and Marie Alino (2020), Filipino Catholic youth employ a pattern of positive religious coping, and there is evidence that the Filipino psyche is always ready to accommodate spirituality when dealing with social issues, sustainability, and environmentalism in this particular case.

4.0 Conclusion

At the outset, the researcher has shown that environmentalism is always invoked when considering sustainable development. This is because development always involves consuming our limited resources: the environment. Hence, environmentalism always goes hand in hand with sustainable development. However, care for the environment and sustainability seem to be in tension with human rights, construed as subjective rights. When conceived as such, human rights become individualistic and justify actions that are antithetical to the common good. Furthermore, this allows the state, the ultimate guarantor of human rights as subjective rights, to justify draconian measures to ensure subjective rights. This conflicts with sustainability, which operates under the presupposition of the common good. Suppose one can act not for the common good but according to what one determines to be suitable for herself/himself. In that case, it seems that one cannot hold sustainability together with a subjective conception of human rights. Hence, a recovery of the meaning of rights as objective was attempted. As objective rights, human rights become the basis for pursuing the common good, including sustainability and environmental preservation.

As seen above, the rights at play in the Filipino psyche are objective (instead of subjective). The ordinary Filipino does not understand himself/herself as an isolated individual but as someone responsible for others and creation. The specific brand of Christianity the Filipino practices is very close to Eastern Christianity in locating the divine in creation. Thus, creation is something to which human beings stand and to which human beings bear duties and responsibilities. In Eastern Christianity, but especially the desert mystics, creation is seen given the final reconciliation of everything that the second coming will bring, a reconciliation that will also reconcile us with creation. This consciousness is already operating in the Filipino psyche, especially in the practice of Folk Catholicism, where Christianity is often seen as a narrative of a whole, the individual being merely a part of that whole. Nevertheless, it defines the whole precisely by being an individual, which, as an individual, constitutes a part of the whole. There is no contradiction between the individual and the whole. This Filipino framework of religious thought allows us to hold together sustainability and human rights. The researcher hopes to have shown how human rights and sustainable development, together with environmental sustainability, can be given more harmony under the lens of the spirituality of Filipino Christians.

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The author contributed alone to the paper. The author reviewed and deemed the final work worthy of submission.

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The author declares no conflict of interest about the publication of this paper.

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