

# Is charity a missing link in sustainable development?

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the moral virtue of charity and its importance in building a just, peaceful and sustainable society. While acts of charity in the form of donations play an important role in a circular economy—reducing the demand for natural resources and alleviating poverty—the moral virtue of charity as *the selfless desire to do good for others* inclines individuals in a broader sense to have goodwill toward each other, put aside their differences, coexist peacefully and support each other in times of trouble. The study explores how charity is viewed in different cultures and traditions, how it can be extended to include all living beings, and how love, empathy and compassion can work together to ease suffering and hardship, enhance social justice, and build resilient societies. Charity as a moral virtue empowers individuals to effect positive change and can help transform society from self-centered, destructive and overconsuming to benign, peaceful, just, and sustainable.

*Keywords: morality, virtue ethics, charity, culture of charity, sustainable development, moral philosophy.*

## 1. Introduction

When studying sustainability and the crisis that increasingly faces humanity if our resource consumption, international relations and treatment of the planet are not better managed, the following questions often arise: Why is there so much pollution? Why are wars occurring? Why are the rainforests being decimated? Why are the oceans being depleted? Why do poverty and injustice still persist?

The answer often given from an evolutionary standpoint is that mankind is affected by a lingering survival instinct that promotes selfish and competitive behaviour and needs to learn to taper its consumption and develop social and environmental responsibility. The answer from a creationist perspective is that at some earlier time mankind fell away from innocence and harmony into contradiction and sin, a condition that has become compounded through generations and is now characterised by all kinds of psychological disorders and irresponsible and destructive behaviours. Whether mankind is sliding down the moral bar or ascending it, we seem to have arrived at the same critical point, and in either case the situation needs to be addressed and addressed urgently.

Overexploitation and mistreatment of the biosphere means that what is extracted exceeds that which is regenerated within the same time frame (Schaefer etc, 2006; Wackernagel, 1996). The materialistic nature of consumerism combined with the tendency to take more than we need and the economic drive for growth and increasing profits make humanity currently unsustainable. Technological development coupled with challenges in regulating new technologies exacerbates this by accelerating extraction and depletion of natural resources and destruction of the environment. Added to this, ongoing violent

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conflicts and wars produce direct destruction and toxic pollution of the environment. The danger of this has been recognised for several decades and is explicitly included in the UN World Charter for Nature as 'Living resources shall not be utilized in excess of their natural capacity for regeneration' (UN, 1982).

Based on precise measurements of forest area decline over time (Potopov etc, 2022; FAO, 2020) and taking forest area as an indicator of broader resource usage, a recent study estimated that the current rate of resource extraction is approximately three times the sustainable rate of natural regeneration (Whitmore, 2024a). The same study highlighted the urgent need for improved regulation of resource extraction, environmental cleanup, and efforts to restore forests and fish stocks as essential measures to accelerate natural regeneration. When combined with a social movement to redefine prosperity in a less materialistic way, these measures can help humanity achieve sustainability.

The issues of environmental destruction and sustainability have been recognised for at least five decades, certainly since the international conferences in the 1990s such as the Earth Summit in Brazil, as well as books such as *Silent Spring* (Carson, 2020), *Limits to Growth* (Meadows etc, 1972) and the *Brundtland Report* (Brundtland, 1987). Despite these longstanding concerns, the problem remains urgent, with many critical factors showing little to no improvement—such as the continued destruction of rainforests, declining sea life, and rising pollution levels, particularly from waste plastics, electronic devices, and military activities worldwide. This suggests that there is a missing link in sustainable development and the related political and economic efforts that is responsible for the tardiness and apparent lack of commitment in addressing these issues.

It is widely recognised that peace and sustainability are qualities of society that are products of the moral condition of the people that make up the society (Kibert etc, 2011; MacIntyre, 1984). In ancient Greece, Aristotle explained how moral virtues constitute a foundation for human flourishing, or eudaimonia, while vices of excess and deficiency lead to unrest, division, conflict, corruption, and the eventual downfall of society (Aristotle, 2025). An example of this the Roman empire where moral decline led to systemic corruption, neglect of social institutions and services, factionalism in the Senate, and the eventual collapse of the empire. In ancient China, Confucius taught that moral character is the foundation of social harmony and growth, and that wisdom, compassion and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities to which individuals should aspire.

Recent studies have explored these ideas in relation to the sustainability crisis, to find solutions not only through technological advancement but also through moral improvement (Whitmore, 2024b; Whitmore, 2025). While technology has the potential to enhance sustainability, it can also accelerate depletion of natural resources if the right ethical guidelines are not followed. These studies argue that it is not possible to achieve peace or sustainability without a systemic moral transformation of society. Without this, the influence of vices such as pride and greed is too powerful and too ingrained into the character of individuals and nations for any meaningful positive change to occur.

Table 1 shows the capital vices and virtues, derived from studies of human behaviour by ancient Greek and early Christian philosophers, and their relation to sustainability. While lust, gluttony and greed, as vices of excess, lead directly to depletion of natural resources to satisfy human over-consumption and materialism, sloth makes no attempt to improve matters by developing and implementing sustainable alternatives or

properly enforcing regulations designed to protect the environment, while wrath, envy and pride foster harmful and destructive activities, refuse to accept responsibility or to relinquish their assumed entitlement or to acknowledge the need for change (Tilby, 2009).

Capital vice	Unsustainable	Capital virtue	Sustainable
Pride	Damages the environment directly (war), fosters consumerism and excess, exploits nature as an entitlement, will not accept accountability or change.	Humility	Accepts responsibility, is prepared to change, respects nature as a shared resource, promotes mindful consumption, and supports initiatives to protect and rebuild the environment.
Envy		Charity	
Wrath		Patience	
Sloth	Tardy response to the crisis.	Diligence	Effectively develops and implements sustainable alternatives.
Greed	Overconsumption leads to over extraction of resources from the environment and excessive waste.	Generosity	Maintains consumption and resource usage at a low level to reduce impact on the environment.
Gluttony		Moderation	
Lust		Self-restraint	

**Table 1.** The capital vices and virtues and how they contribute to and help solve the sustainability crisis.

The capital virtues are positive character traits or qualities that counter the capital vices and enable individuals to flourish and live harmoniously with each other and the environment. Humility, charity, and patience foster benevolence, encourage responsibility, and promote peaceful, respectful coexistence. Diligence makes dedicated attempts to develop and implement sustainable alternatives. The vices of excess are countered by generosity, moderation and self-restraint, reducing consumption and frivolous usage of natural resources, and moderating the desire for luxury and material wealth.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri depicts the moral universe, and highlights the significance of virtue, repentance, and moral integrity in the advancement of mankind (Alighieri, 2024; Singleton, 2014). The second canticle, *Purgatorio*, depicts moral improvement as a process of purging the capital vices and cultivating the capital virtues. It is presented as an allegory for a lifelong endeavor involving self-examination and ethical study, alongside the ongoing effort to uphold moral standards in daily life and interpersonal relationships (Alighieri, 2004; Mahoney, 1961).

In these early studies, particularly those of Thomas Aquinas, charity was depicted not just as giving alms, but as *the selfless desire to do good for others*—a moral virtue that inclines individuals to perform acts of mercy and kindness, aiming to alleviate suffering and hardship, and contribute to the world in positive ways, without expectation of anything in return. This broader understanding of charity is proposed in this paper as a missing link in sustainable development, for it is our good will, mercy and kindness that can transform our relationships with each other and with the planet and foster a more compassionate and sustainable future.

Views from other traditions, particularly Buddhism, show that charity should not be constrained only to human needs but should be inclusive of all living beings. By aligning human love and compassion, and the desire to do good for others, with a deep respect for life and an understanding of the interconnectivity of all things, charity becomes a foundational component in creating an integrated, harmonious, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Figure 1 shows *La Charité*, a depiction of charity, by French painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau from c. 1878. The lady embodies the love and compassion that



Figure 1. *La Charité* by William-Adolphe Bouguereau from c. 1878.

underlie charity to give shelter and protection to the children. The children can be seen as representing not only human children but the vulnerable in general. In the context of sustainability, the five children can be interpreted as the five terrestrial biomes—forests, deserts, grasslands, tundra, and mountains—or the five spheres of Earth—the biosphere, cryosphere, lithosphere, aquasphere, and atmosphere—highlighting the vital role of charity in nurturing and preserving all aspects of our planet.

Earth scientists and biologists agree that natural ecosystems are delicately balanced, fragile and vulnerable. In the era of the Anthropocene, technology endows humans with unprecedented power over the planet's systems, which are as children in relation to us. We are called to protect and nurture these ecosystems as stewards of creation. This is a natural expression of charity when our desire to good for others is extended to the natural world including animals, plants, and entire ecosystems, which are themselves vast integrated living beings.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante introduces the principle of *contrappasso* as an expression of divine justice. According to this principle, immorality leads to discord, disarray and havoc, which in turn become a form of punishment. Viewing the sustainability crisis as a consequence of our own misconduct—especially our disregard for nature and the planet, and our lack of self-restraint and responsibility—if the natural ecosystems collapse and we suffer and perish as a result, it is our own fault. However, when we think and act with kindness and mercy, we can bring relief to the biosphere enhancing the health and longevity of the ecosystems and fostering our own harmonious coexistence with them.

According to the Century dictionary (Whitney, 1889), charity is: 1) love in its highest and broadest manifestation; 2) the good affections men ought to feel towards one another, good will; 3) benevolence, liberality in relieving the wants of others, philanthropy; 4) any act of kindness or benevolence; 5) alms, anything bestowed gratuitously on a person or persons in need; 6) a disposition inclined to favourable judgements; 7) a foundation for the relief of a certain class of persons; 8) a gift in trust for promoting the welfare of the community or of mankind at large.

The following sections examine moral virtue as a means of character development with a focus on charity—how it underpins societal wellbeing, fosters environmental stewardship, and acts as a foundation for a more compassionate, harmonious and gentle humanity that can thrive sustainably on Earth for generations to come.

## 2. A classical view of moral virtue

Since earliest recorded times, mankind has recognised morality as being fundamental to the quality of life, both individually and socially (Lauren, 2013). In ancient Mesopotamia, the codes of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 BC) and Hammurabi (c. 1754 BC) illustrate how individual conduct was regulated to establish social order and justice. In ancient Egypt, concepts such as Ma'at embodied truth, justice, and cosmic order, reflecting moral principles that governed personal and social behavior. In India, the ancient Vedas (c. 1500 BC) regarded moral conduct to be a duty that reflects and maintains the cosmic order. In China, Confucius (c. 550–479 BC) emphasized moral virtue as a basis for social harmony.

The evolution of Greek philosophical thought connected human moral virtue to the rational order of the universe. Heraclitus conceived of Logos as the universal principle governing change and harmony in the cosmos (Hülsz, 2013), while Aristotle developed the study of virtue ethics in which he asserted that character development should reflect the Logos to achieve harmony within oneself, with others and with the cosmos—a condition he called flourishing or eudaimonia (Aristotle, 2025). By living according to a 'golden mean' man could avoid the pitfalls of excess and deficiency. This middle path enabled humans to manage their carnal passions more effectively to achieve a clarity of mind and perception that led to the many great and original ideas across a wide range of issues that the Greek period is renowned for.

It was believed that humans were meant to be free in their actions and way of life, but that inner forces driven by cosmic forces played man like a puppet. Greek tragedies often explored the idea that man was a victim, struggling to lead his own life against forces that controlled and manipulated him. However, it was understood that humans possess a rational mind that enables them to manifest and adhere to some direction in their lives. True freedom was seen not only as the absence of external constraints but mastery over the passions, desires, and irrational impulses through disciplined thought and self-control.

This approach emphasized the study of motivation and behaviour and the importance of objective principles that led man to virtue, wisdom, and a more peaceful and harmonious life. Encapsulating these ideas Pythagorus (570–495 BC) taught that 'no man is free who cannot control himself'. Reason was the faculty that enabled man to question, learn, understand and act rationally, and to resolve disputes and moral dilemmas more effectively through virtue instead of vice (Cook, 2012; Vlastos, 1991).

A system of moral laws was discovered that held man in harmony with the rational order. Such laws as respect of others, honesty, non-maleficence, justice, social responsibility and so on, maintained the wellbeing of human individual and communal life. The moral laws and the system of cosmic order behind them were thought to be the basis of true wisdom when humans try to understand their place within it. According to Thomas Merton 'reason is the path to faith, and faith takes over when reason can say no more.'

Christianity built upon these ideas by asserting that Jesus was the incarnation of Logos, and as such was the model for humanity to emulate in relation to the new covenant (Benedict XVI, 2017; Origen, 2013). At the heart of Jesus's teachings was love—the creation of life was attributed to the will of God acting through the cosmos as a divine act of love to bring about, nurture, and sustain all living things. Jesus taught a profound and less personal form of love and founded his entire teaching on it (Mark 12:30–31).

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante incorporates these ideas into the narrative of his epic poem, showing through examples how human actions reflect a spectrum of inherent inclinations within the soul. These inclinations include the desire for companionship, comfort and sustenance, self-expression, to feel appreciated, and to feel connected to something greater and spiritual. The capital vices are distortions of these inclinations that disrupt the inner harmony of the soul causing unrest, confusion, disease and obsession, while the capital virtues rebalance these inclinations, restoring harmony, fostering peace, cooperation, genuine progress, and spiritual growth.

This inner state of harmony or imbalance shapes a person's behaviour, so that the world becomes a reflection of the collective inner workings of human beings. Dante describes how the capital vices represent a fallen world where humanity and integrity have been lost, and that a peaceful world can only come about when human beings achieve a state of inner peace and moral integrity. The allegory of Purgatory represents the journey of moral transformation and spiritual renewal that forms the basis for inner peace and the creation of a more harmonious and just world.

### 3. Empathy and compassion

Empathy and compassion are widely regarded as fundamental natural attributes of human beings (Rifkin, 2009). While empathy is the ability to feel and connect to others through feelings, and to know what those feelings mean, compassion is the desire to bring easement and relief to suffering (Vieten et al, 2024). These attributes provide a naturalistic basis of feeling and relating, upon which charity as the desire to good for others can act.

By experiencing joy and sadness and recognizing these emotions in others, we gain a deeper understanding of human life and are better equipped to offer encouragement and support when needed. In this, empathy constitutes a feedback loop that allows us to perceive how our words and actions affect others. These processes of feeling and connecting form the foundation of human relationships and community life.

However, empathy can extend beyond interpersonal relations to all living things. For example, a woodsman with empathy might feel the sadness of the trees being felled and the loss the forest feels with each passing tree. Similarly, a farmer would feel the fear and terror of the animals in the pens, and their desperation trying to escape. Empathy would feel for the person on death row, their remorse and longing for a second chance, and the heartache of their friends and loved ones.

Compassion calls us to recognize the inherent worth of all beings and to act with kindness, understanding, and a desire for meaningful change. If it is necessary to use trees, they must be treated with respect and gratitude, and when felled their wood used sparingly. If it is necessary to kill animals for food, they must be given a good life, and their final moments must minimise suffering. And the man on death row must, absolutely must, be given a second chance and the support and assistance needed to facilitate his rehabilitation and eventual reintegration into society, as far as possible. Empathy and compassion would never drive past the homeless looking the other way, plant metal spikes in the ground to prevent them from seeking shelter, or design benches to prevent them from sleeping (Binnington, 2022; Karthik, 2020), and would never accept slavery (Clarke, 2019; Paris, 2007) or apartheid (Pappe, 2015; Baconi, 2022).

However, there is a pervasive pressure in the world against empathy and compassion, and although they are among our most valuable treasures, they are easily lost. Teachers and parents often advise children to suppress their feelings in order to do what is ‘necessary’ or to make money, and propaganda is often used to dehumanize other groups to incite individuals to act violently against them without realising the harm they are causing. Both *Faust* (von Goethe, 1962) and *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 2008) describe scenarios where individuals give up their innate empathy and compassion in exchange for wealth and success.

Narcissism, psychopathy and sociopathy are dangerous psychological disorders in which individuals lack empathy and compassion. These conditions can produce irrational hostile behaviours, and lead to conflict and violence (Bolusi, 2024). However, the *Divine Comedy* teaches that all humans, regardless of how confused, derelict or corrupted they may be, possess the potential for redemption—so long as they repent and devote themselves to the cultivation of moral virtues, which serve as the basis for a reorganization of values and intentions, leading to a harmonious realignment with the fundamental principles and intrinsic values of life.

Buddhism teaches that it is not right to harm any living being. Monks from various traditions often go so far as to sweep the path they walk to avoid stepping on even the tiniest creatures. Embracing a more compassionate and environmentally conscious path involves prioritizing the value of life over material wealth. This enables individuals to engage in activities and build communities that are genuinely sustainable, with long-term viability—potentially lasting for generations or even millennia.

Acts of charity motivated by love and compassion therefore have two complimentary natures: positive charity contributes to life through acts such as dedicating time and effort to the community, giving alms to the poor, and offering kindness and support to others, while negative charity entails refraining from actions that might cause harm or increase suffering, hardship or injustice—whether directly or indirectly. Together, these two aspects reinforce the ideal of living a harmless life and highlight charity as a true celebration of life.

#### 4. Charity as love in action

While the moral virtue of charity is the desire to do good for others, it is also seen as an expression of a deeper divine love. Early Christian thinkers defined *agape* as God’s unconditional love for humankind. Believers are called to emulate that love, perfecting their own human love by removing excess, deficiency, and distortion. *Caritas* was the term used to denote practical acts of love that expressed human efforts to emulate God’s love (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006). According to Thomas Aquinas, charity is primarily fellowship with God, from which flows a desire to do good for others. *Caritas* is most often translated today as charity. This perspective views charity—guided by empathy and compassion—as a devotional act that not only alleviates suffering and hardship but also aligns with the divine will, which acts within and flows through the cosmos and all living things as the creative force of life.

By connecting to a spiritual motive, love empowers empathy, compassion and acts of charity, enhancing their endurance and resilience, reducing fatigue and burnout and giving them the capacity to sustain longer-term initiatives aimed at providing lasting relief, meaningful improvements and systemic change. Figures such as Florence Nightingale and Mother Teresa exemplified love in action, which supported and inspired their work and made them exemplary of the human capacity for goodness.



The wellbeing of human society and the communal nature of individuals are greatly strengthened by charity. It provides a foundational layer of goodwill upon which all other aspects of society—its systems and institutions—depend. When genuine goodwill is absent, these structures become vulnerable to dysfunction, corruption and collapse. Therefore, the sustainability and prosperity of society rely heavily on the presence of authentic goodwill as the basis for collective growth and success, much like Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, where true human flourishing arises from virtuous living and harmonious relationships.

As expressions of love, acts of benevolence, kindness, and mercy contribute significantly to the well-being of others and foster a deeper sense of connection and community. They help reduce suffering and promote harmony, embodying the true spirit of charity. According to Conrad Hilton (1887–1979), 'charity is a supreme virtue, and the great channel through which the mercy of God is passed onto mankind'.

Charity as love in action played a foundational role in the development of Western civilisation (Ulhorn, 2024). The Benedictine Abbey of Saint Gall in Switzerland, founded around 719 AD, developed systems of education, social support and healthcare as part of its charitable mission. Together with the Abbey of Sainte-Élisabeth in France, founded in 1190, these are among the earliest institutions dedicated to improving social conditions, fighting against injustice and acting as centres of research, study and knowledge (Tanner, 1979).

## 5. Charity around the world

While charity has long been a foundation of Christian teachings and Christian life (Laboa, 1985), records of charity extend into the remotest history around the globe (Bremner, 2017; Frenkel, 2009; van der Horst, 2016). According to the Upanishads—the ancient sacred texts of India—the ultimate reality or Brahman is itself seen as embodying empathy and compassion (Easwaran, 2007), which underpin all aspects of life and serve as a foundational model for human behavior and the promotion of charity.

In Buddhism, empathy and compassion are seen as foundational qualities that underpin the development of authentic wisdom and social cohesion. Buddha stated that 'true charity occurs only when there are no notions of giving, giver, or gift', while a well-known Buddhist saying is 'use your voice for kindness, your ears for compassion, your hands for charity, your mind for truth, and your heart for love'.

Central to Buddhist practice are the principles of non-harm (*ahimsa*) and compassion (*karuna*) for all beings. These inspire acts of charity and serve to alleviate suffering. Buddhist teachings often emphasize human interconnectedness with nature, inspiring efforts to protect ecosystems and promote sustainability (Bodhi, 2005). According to the *Sutta Nipata* of the Pali Canon, Buddha said 'Let man not destroy, or cause to be destroyed, any life at all, nor support the acts of those who do so. Let him refrain from even hurting any creature, both those that are strong and those that are weak', and according to the *Kshudraka Agama* 'Whether they be creatures of the land or air, whoever harms here any living being, who has no compassion for all that live, let such a one be known as depraved'.

Confucius emphasised benevolence (*ren*) as the fundamental virtue guiding moral behavior and human relationships—an intrinsic attitude of kindness, compassion, and humaneness toward others, similar in many ways to charity (Yu, 2010). According to Confucius, 'one should desire benevolence, it is the ultimate goal', and according to



Mencius (372–289 BC), a prominent student of Confucius (551–479 BC), ‘no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others’, highlighting the innate human capacity for empathy and compassion. This idea is encapsulated in the saying, ‘the wise man is not learned; he is benevolent’, which connects inherent human qualities to actions that can contribute towards improving the world and relieving suffering and hardship.

In Hinduism, acts of charity and giving (*dana*) are considered sacred duties, with offerings to temples, the poor, and animals. Many Hindu traditions revere certain animals—cows for example that represent qualities of gentleness and non-violence—advocating for their protection and humane treatment. Hindu philosophy emphasizes living in harmony with nature, with sacred groves and rituals dedicated to natural elements. Individuals practicing Hindu meditation and Yoga often describe an enhancement of empathy enabling them to have a more profound connection to other living things and to life itself, enabling a more authentic and holistic type of development, emphasizing inner peace (*antahkarana shanti*), compassion (*karuna*), and spiritual growth (*adhyatma vikas*) (Sharma, 2022).

In Islam, *sadaqah* is voluntary charity, not necessarily in the form of monetary donations, but by good deeds that express good will and help others. *Sadaqah* can include acts such as helping a neighbor, feeding the hungry, or even a kind word, reflecting the belief that charity extends beyond material possessions. The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) advised, ‘Give charity without delay, for it stands in the way of calamity’ and ‘do not show lethargy or negligence in giving alms and charity until your last breath’. This emphasizes the importance of consistently practicing kindness and generosity as a lifelong spiritual duty. Through these practices, Islam encourages believers to continually seek opportunities to serve others and to view charity as a means of spiritual growth and a pathway to social harmony (Singer, 2008).

The beliefs of traditional Shinto assert that all beings possess some form of awareness and form part of both an individual and collective consciousness (panpsychism) (Hardacre, 2016; Ono, 1994). This perspective extends to both corporeal and incorporeal beings, such as nature spirits (*kami*, *kodama*), emphasizing a deep respect for all aspects of the natural world, as depicted in the 1997 animated film *Princess Mononoke* by Studio Ghibli. Charity is seen not only as a moral duty but also as a way to honour and maintain harmony with these spirits and the natural order. By practicing kindness and generosity, individuals contribute to the balance and wellbeing of both the community and the spiritual realm, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and mutual respect.

Shamanic traditions regard charity as a sacred act that fosters harmony among all beings—people, animals, and nature—recognizing their interconnected spirits and energies (Castaneda, 1968; Harner, 2011). Shamans believe that by giving support, respect, and gratitude to others and the natural world, they help maintain spiritual balance and ensure the well-being of the entire ecosystem. Acts of kindness toward animals and the environment are considered vital offerings that honour the spirits within all living things, promoting mutual respect and reinforcing the sacred unity of life.

#### 4. Charity in Renaissance Europe

The Renaissance was a cultural epoch in Europe, spanning from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, primarily centred in Italy and especially in cities like Florence and Venice; with Florence widely considered to be the birthplace of the Renaissance. During

this time many advancements were made in science, art, social philosophy and ethics that reflected a rebirth of classical Roman and Greek ideas; new views emerged of how humanity should live, emphasising individuality, personal freedom and responsibility.

A seminal figure of this time was Dante Alighieri, a scholar, political scientist and poet (Boccaccio, 2020; Lansing, 2000). Dante dedicated the last 20 years of his life, while in political exile in Verona and Ravenna, to writing the *Divine Comedy*, a 14,000-line epic poem widely recognised as one of the most thorough and insightful expositions of human nature and existence. Framed primarily as the journey of the human soul in the afterlife, it is widely interpreted as an allegory of human life in which the writer and protagonist Dante explores the consequences of moral abandonment, the possibility of redemption through repentance and moral improvement, and the higher potentials of human life based in spiritual growth and enlightenment (Luzzi, 2024).

The theology of the *Divine Comedy* is based on Christian, Greek and Roman understanding and aligns with the biblical view of the Fall of Man (Wicksteed, 2002). The poem is filled with symbolism and needs to be read alongside commentaries that help unlock its deeper meanings, such as those offered by Charles Singleton and Allen Mandelbaum. In *Purgatorio*, souls engage in a process of moral improvement symbolised by their ascent of a seven-terraced mountain. At each terrace, souls purge themselves of one of the capital vices and cultivate the corresponding capital virtue (Alighieri, 2004; Gregory, 2012; Mahoney, 1961), restoring their inherent integrity and humanity.

Dante first emphasizes the importance of faith, hope and love, without which the endeavour of moral transformation is not possible. Proceeding to the first terrace, souls then purge themselves of pride and cultivate humility (Toumanova, 2008). In the Middle Ages, pride was self-centeredness and an exaggerated or inflated sense of self-importance, traits vividly illustrated in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which explores the corrupting influence of power and self-interest. Humility is the moral virtue of having an honest and realistic self-view and a proper relationship with both society and the cosmos—making it an essential ingredient of authenticity. It enables us to study, listen and learn, and appreciate the wisdom inherent in the designs of things, and guides us to respect that wisdom, refraining from imposing our unenlightened views upon the natural order but striving to live in accord with it.

Charity is cultivated on the second terrace. The vice that is purged is envy, a harmful and destructive trait characterized as 'enmity prompted by covetousness' (Whitney, 1889). On this terrace, souls move along slowly, reflecting on their past lives when envy had led them to see only what others possessed, failing to recognise their humanity. This had reduced their ability to empathise and engage in genuine human relations. They meditated on passages from the Gospel and stories from classical literature that taught selfless love and charity, learning to have gratitude for what they already had and to express mercy and kindness to others. Once they embraced charity, it set the theme for the remaining five terraces, which focused on the purging and cultivation of the other capital vices and virtues.

During the Renaissance, it was common practice in art to depict moral qualities through personification. These symbolic images emphasized traits that people of the time could relate to intuitively and understand without the requirement of language skills, which many did not have. The fresco by Giotto (1267–1337) in the Scrovegni Chapel features grisaille panels of moral vices and virtues including envy (*invidia*) and charity (*caritas*), illustrating these concepts visually (Pisani, 2021).

Giotto depicts envy as a Gorgon-like woman grasping a bag of money while reaching out to covet the wealth of others. The figure is being consumed by flames representing the self-consuming nature of envy and the encroachment of Inferno—the destination of the envious unless they repent. A snake around the woman's head represents the insidious and corrosive thoughts of envy that poison the mind and spirit. By fixating on the possessions of others, envy perpetuates the materialistic mindset that measures progress and success by material wealth, overlooking the authentic value of a person's character and personal qualities.

In contrast, Giotto depicts charity as a woman of kindly disposition, calm and unstrained, with a halo of emotional refinement, mindfulness and benevolence. In contrast to envy, she is giving alms to the poor. In this way she is participating in the divine economy in which the abundance of creation is to be shared, cultivated, and used for the benefit of all. Additionally she is shown receiving spiritual gifts in the way of inspiration, satisfaction and fulfilment. Charity embodies authentic love and concern for others—embracing compassion, kindness, and mercy—upholding a vision of a flourishing humanity. Irish poet and writer Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) captured this sentiment in the words, 'the true perfection of man lies not in what man has, but in what man is.'

The value of these ideas from centuries ago lies in the profound commitment that figures like Dante and Giotto had to the pursuit of truth through study of the cosmos and human nature. The slow pace and relative peace and quiet of the time allowed a greater connection to conscience and intuition. Today, modern technology and science inundate humanity with information, but the deeper meanings and significances of things are often lost, while most media provide images, information and narratives that lead individuals astray, away from authentic self-awareness, spiritual insight, and truth.

## 5. Charity as a force for good

Charity is a powerful force capable of healing and transforming the world for the better. Peace and harmony within and between individuals are not merely ideals but an essential foundation for human progress and development, necessitating constant vigilance to preserve. According to Plato in *Timaeus*, the movement of the cosmos is always towards the good, guided by the rational ordering principle of Logos (Plato, 2009). This suggests that goodwill is the basis of true progress as it aligns acts with the greater moral order producing positive results and a clear conscience. Conversely, acts not rooted in goodwill are less likely to succeed over time because they oppose the moral order and tend to produce negative results along with feelings of guilt and shame, as reflected in the saying 'crime doesn't pay'.

The capital virtues incline mankind to the good and restore honesty and respect to the intellect. The following examples illustrate how charity, as a reflection of that greater goodness, can foster peace and contribute to sustainable development.

### 5.1 In human relations and society

The quality and sustainability of any relationship, community or society comes down to how individuals think about and treat each other. The second clause definition of charity in the Century dictionary is 'the good affections men ought to feel towards one another, good will' (Whitney, 1889). Good will, given from one to another, is the foundation of human social life and supports the systems and structures that enable society to flourish.

The exchange of goodwill between individuals or groups promotes honesty, trust, friendship and cooperation. It means that they have the best interests of each other at heart and are not acting out of self-interest at the expense of others. This mutual understanding and respect help build strong, positive relationships and a harmonious community. Charity acting in this way produces a restoration of belief in humanity and gives hope for the future. Generations after us will inherit the world we leave them, making our efforts to build moral and sustainable societies even more important.

While individuals generally work to earn a living and provide for their families, integrating charity alters motivation and adds value to the work by connecting to a greater cause—the betterment of society for all and investment in future generations. Laying bricks, building roads, solving equations, or designing bridges can all be part of a true and meaningful purpose that enhances the dignity and self-respect of each person.

Goodwill and concern for others change how we think about certain types of work. Mining, the use of child labour, and low wages all need to be addressed to ensure people are properly equipped and trained and protected from exploitation. While individuals and groups may have unique talents, those talents find greater meaning and purpose serving the true progress of humanity. Wherever there is hunger, poverty, injustice or other forms of suffering and hardship, charity can bring relief.

Charity aligns closely with a broader sense of justice, traditionally understood as ‘giving mercy to the poor.’ This is rooted in the belief that every individual should have equal basic opportunities, and that systemic bias is inherently unjust. Consequently, charity is essential for building a just society. When individuals hoard more than they need or use resources for personal excess neglecting the needs of others and the common good, they create an unjust situation that deprives others of their basic needs. In 2024, some 500 new millionaires and 25 billionaires emerged worldwide, exacerbating global injustice—millions of people continue to experience poverty due to the excesses of a few.

Perhaps the most well-known story of charity is the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:25–37): a man is beaten and robbed by bandits and left on the side of the road to perish; a priest and a Levite walk past without stopping; a passing Samaritan stops, helps the man, binds his wounds, gives him some of his own clothes and takes him to an inn where he pays for the man’s needs. The Samaritan is the epitome of a good neighbor acting without regard for ethnicity or social status of the man in need.

Transcendence of ethnic boundaries is a sign of true charity for it is based on the conviction that all people are inherently worthy of dignity and respect. Currently, racial and ethnic bias remain significant obstacles to achieving global peace. These prejudices fuel hostility, segregation, apartheid, and, in extreme cases, genocide. Overcoming such divisions requires a genuine commitment to charity—extending kindness and respect across all boundaries—and working towards a more inclusive and harmonious world where every individual is valued regardless of their background.

In a culture of charity, people do not need to fight for their rights, their education will help them understand endowment and responsibility. Charity needs to start with the baby in the womb as the most precious and the most vulnerable. If a society is prepared to willfully kill the unborn who are in a state of absolute vulnerability without any possibility of defending themselves, and represent the future of our species, then the very concept of rights has no humane or rational basis.

Acts of giving—whether through donations, words of encouragement, moral support, or simple kindness like a smile—serve as meaningful ways to strengthen social bonds. Acts of mercy and kindness help connect individuals, nurture a sense of community, and contribute to the overall well-being of society (Tuckness, 2014). Small gestures, when offered sincerely and when needed, can have a profound positive impact reinforcing the social fabric and promoting a more humane and cohesive community.

## **5.2 In relation to hostility and conflict**

There is a great deal of hostility in the world between nations right now. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data database (ACLED) there have been an estimated 200,000 conflict events in 2024, twice as many as reported in 2020 (ACLED, 2025a). The current threat of nuclear Armageddon makes the issue of human relations very much more urgent (Ritter, 2025). According to recent studies (Liang, 2025), world military expenditure in 2024 was 2.718 trillion USD; 2.5 % of world GDP and 7.1 % of world government spending. While a military is necessary to maintain stability and defend against aggressors, it is questionable whether such a large budget is truly needed for these purposes.

The tendency for humans to engage in conflict over even the most superficial differences, such as which football team is best, is a major flaw in human nature and a significant obstacle to peace and sustainability (Meadows, 1972). The classical view is that hostility and conflict arise from moral vices, and that only through genuine moral transformation—an inner transformation of the soul—can these tendencies be overcome, allowing for peaceful coexistence.

In the teachings of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, schism within the Church is seen as stemming from a lack of charity (e.g. Summa II-II Q39.A2). This suggests that hostility and conflict between individuals and nations can also be attributed—at least in part—to a lack of charity. While humanity has split into groups through history, it is essential to have the view that regardless of skin colour, language and ethnicity, we are all human beings and members of the human family. The potential that we share for wisdom, love and compassion represents a unifying principle that transcends superficial differences.

History has shown that individuals and groups can often become obsessed with the belief that they are right and entitled to oppress or punish others they disagree with or don't like. In 1600 Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake by order of Pope Clement VIII for holding a view of the universe different to the Catholic church. Since that time, countless individuals have been censured and even imprisoned for their views. In 1976 Mohammad Ali was imprisoned because he did not agree with the war in Vietnam. These are instances where charity is lacking. The fact that we have different views reflects our uniqueness and ability for critical thought; this should be celebrated because we can learn from each other, and society can move on through selection of actions and policies that are most benign, just and effective.

History has shown that rather than charity, nations prefer to dominate and oppress each other. Often this is to own and control natural resources (Butler, 1919; Perkins, 2023), but it can also be ideological differences and competition. Integration of charity in international relations promotes sharing, open dialogue, diplomacy, and friendship, diminishing hostilities and helping resolve disputes peacefully (Whitmore, 2025). This suggests that the best defense is not a strong offence but a strong dedication to the wellbeing of others, in which an assumed enemy becomes a friend.

Charity as ‘the good affections men ought to feel towards one another, good will’ is an essential basis for peaceful coexistence of peoples and would significantly ease tensions and hostilities between conflicting groups such as the Chinese and Tibetans, Hindus and Muslims, and the English and Irish. The current devastating situation in Palestine (Amnesty International, 2022) can also be interpreted as a profound lack of charity. According to a recent study of charity and justice in the context of imperialism, where there is no charity there is no justice and there are no lasting solutions (van Dam, 2022).

The more developed and powerful nations in the world today might benefit from reflecting on the quality of magnanimity—the noble, generous, and lofty spirit, characterized by a charitable nature willing to forgive, to act with kindness and mercy, and to elevate others—as a national characteristic worth striving for. By prioritizing honesty, respect, and goodwill, world leaders might more effectively address the challenges facing humanity today through dialogue and diplomacy, promoting peaceful solutions for a better future.

All the nations of the world are nations of human beings, which means that fighting against each other is in many ways fighting against ourselves. In *Les Misérables* Victor Hugo wrote that all wars are fundamentally civil wars because all men are brothers (Hugo, 2015). When we have the humility to recognize and accept our shared humanity, our hostility will subside, and it will be easier to live and work together.

According to many traditional teachings, when human beings fight against each other, by allowing their aggressive and hostile impulses to control them they have already lost the most important fight, which is the inner fight to live mindfully, manage and control the passions and impulses, foster peace and resolve disputes through respectful, rational dialogue. With this perspective, war is a symbol of human failure, not only to live together in peace but a failure to accept who we really are.

### 5.3 In the environment

Over the last few hundred years the environment has been ruthlessly exploited as a resource to fuel human excess. The Spanish Armada, for example, cost European forests around 100,000 trees, the US railroads some 60 million trees for the ties alone not counting bridges and station buildings. Today around 10,000 square kilometres of Amazon rainforest are cut down each year corresponding to around 350 million trees. At this rate and combined with global warming and exponential population increase, recent estimates report that forests may be eradicated within the next 85 years (Whitmore, 2024a). The same decimation is taking place in the seas and oceans (Setianti etc, 2024).

Human activities continue to generate massive amounts of pollution, particularly waste plastic (Sá, 2022), toxic chemicals such as Monsanto's Glyphosate (Maggi, 2020) and hazardous e-waste from batteries and electronic components (Magalini, 2016). These pollutants are no longer only local problems, but they permeate ecosystems globally, threatening the health and well-being of the biosphere.

The seriousness of the situation raises many questions: Where is this all heading? What sort of world are we leaving our children? What do we need to do? And although there is a growing global awareness and sense of urgency, it is necessary to also ask: Is this awareness rising quickly enough? Is it being translated into positive action such as systemic adoption of sustainable alternatives? Is it powerful enough to counter social inertia, and political and economic resistance to change?

Such questions are central to environmental sociology, a field of study that investigates the complex relationships between human societies and the natural environment (Gould, 2014). As part of this, it considers how our perceptions and attitudes influence our response to the sustainability crisis. Acts of charity—such as showing mercy and kindness toward animals, forests, oceans, and shared natural spaces—and compassionate actions like environmental stewardship promote sustainable practices which help ensure the health and balance of our planet for future generations. In relation to environmental ethics (Siddiqui, 2024) these issues are studied via both evolutionary (Rammel, 2003) and theological (Körtner, 2016) approaches.

As the mega economies of China, India and Africa emerge, these problems are expected to increase, driving us towards a perfect storm of doomsday scenarios in the next few decades. To avoid a dystopic future and ecological catastrophe, mankind needs to move away from a consuming, destructive almost parasitic culture and instead focus on reforming ourselves and exploring the more positive aspects of our *raison d'être*.

Not all humans disregard the environment—this attitude largely stems from civilization. For example, the first of the Five Precepts in Buddhism is to abstain from taking life, meaning not to kill any living being, from insects to humans. While it may seem extreme, the food chain shows that all creatures are essential for the system's sustainability.

Often customs and habits retain uncharitable and unsustainable practices without our knowing. One example is the Christmas tree. According to an American Indian perspective, it is unclear how and why civilized man would cut down a beautiful tree, put it in the corner of a room and watch it die for two weeks. By refraining from this custom and replacing it with a sustainable alternative, an estimated 120 million trees each year would remain in the world to restore forests and absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Converting Christmas tree plantations into forest restoration projects would require financial support from government or charities but could utilize existing manpower and equipment. This could spark a gradual de-commercialization of Christmas, reducing mass consumption and waste, lowering our environmental impact and restoring the holiday to its spiritual roots. Replacing the Christmas tree with the Jesse Tree would restore the older and more meaningful symbol of the Christian faith and significantly increase sustainability.

If we are to live sustainably, there is much that we can learn from the perspectives and insights of indigenous peoples. We first need to realise that ecosystems are living beings. Indigenous peoples have always regarded nature as a home in which trees are their brothers and the rivers their sisters. There is a big difference between using the environment respectfully as a source of sustenance and plundering it for profit. Pollution, habitat change, loss of biodiversity and forest area constitute a state of sadness and ill health for these ecosystems.

The following are practical ways that charity can restore the wellbeing of the planet:

- Ecological investment: Individuals and businesses put a percentage of profit back into the environment, building eco-parks, supporting local eco-restoration projects, and contributing to national and international eco-friendly organizations.
- Land reclamation: Industries should be incentivized through fiscal and sustainability policies to take responsibility for the demolishing of vacated buildings, such as old factories and warehouses, returning the land to its original natural state.
- Environmental cleanup: A systemic clean-up of the planet is urgently required in which government, academia and industry need to cooperate to fund and develop solutions



that remove pollution from the environment, especially glyphosate from water, microplastics from the environment, and radioactive tritium from sea water.

- Shared commuting: Using public or shared transport over individual transport reduces resource consumption and pollution easing our demand upon natural resources.
- Family size management: Choosing not to have so many children can be made as an act of charity to the planet as a way of reducing our impact and resource usage.

### 5.5 In the economy

Traditional economic models, especially those based on classical and neoclassical economics, assume that individuals and businesses act in their own self-interest to maximize profit (Blanchard, 2020; Smith, 2012). This concept, known as ‘homo economicus’ (Nitsch, 1982), teaches that societal development takes place through the rational calculations of individuals aimed at maximizing their own self-interest. While ‘self-interest’ includes legitimate needs, desires, and aspirations, it often reflects the flawed or fallen psychology of mankind characterized by greed and egoism, which inevitably reduce to luxury and excess, and rapidly become unsustainable (Wicksteed, 1910).

This is also reflected in the fact that most national economies are debt-based, which encourages people to live beyond their means and necessitates economic growth to pay off the accumulating debt. This is exacerbated by usury—charging interest on loans rather than a single administration fee—and compound interest. Such a system does not lean towards fairness, justice, peace and sustainability, but towards increasing consumption, competition, and increased environmental depletion, giving rise to market invention, in which products and services are designed primarily to generate profit rather than provide inherent value, and predatory practices like vulture capitalism (Schein, 2003).

According to (Hubbard and Kane, 2014) the modern economic world order will collapse as did Rome unless a new economical-political system is introduced. Self-interest as the underlying driver of an economy can too easily foster corruption which undermines social integrity and stability and when warped by greed promotes short-term gains over long-term stability. One indicator of this is national debt. According to the US Debt Clock ([www.usdebtclock.org](http://www.usdebtclock.org)), the US national debt has recently surpassed \$37 trillion, owed to a combination of banks and other nations. This amounts to approximately \$108,000 debt per citizen. Such massive financial liability holds both the nation and individuals hostage.

Historically, it was understood that debt levels could spiral out of control, especially through usury, and in many cases, a debt jubilee was instituted every few years to allow individuals and communities to reset financially (Graeber, 2021; Luthy, 2021). This illustrates how charity in the form of debt-forgiveness worked with self-interest to maintain social harmony and economic resilience. Moderation is also considered to be an essential component of long-term economic stability (Daly, 1991), especially as it relates to resource consumption and ecological-economic balance (Daly et al., 2016).

As uncapped economic growth is environmentally unsustainable, it is imperative that a new metric is established not based on GDP. This calls for a fresh appraisal of prosperity as the basis for a new prosperity index. This would likely include factors that measure personal satisfaction and fulfillment, and factors that measure the perceived quality of society and the wellbeing of the planet and would probably need to redefine what is considered as progress and success.

Charity can serve as a guiding principle in business practices. Instead of viewing profit as the sole objective, businesses can adopt a community-centered approach providing products and services that benefit the local environment and community development and wellbeing. In this way, businesses can become catalysts for positive social change, building trust, loyalty, and a sustainable foundation for long-term success, leading to a more balanced and resilient society. For example, the traditional practice of businesses supporting local schools, orphans and widows, and providing subsidized housing and educational scholarships.

Paying dividends to shareholders provides an incentive for companies to maximize profit. However, with a charitable mindset, shareholders could become supporters of local businesses motivated more by altruism. With increased transparency, businesses could use these investments to operate and grow, providing valuable services without the pressure to focus solely on profits. Companies would then be less likely to cut corners on sustainable practices and instead prioritize eco-friendly operations that contribute to community development.

Economic theorists might want to explore economic models that integrate charity (Trimmer, 2022). These would need to exclude war, to promote peaceful solutions. A socio-economic system based on charity does not face the same constraints as one driven by profit, since it prioritizes community building and adding value rather than merely selling goods and services for profit. Is it possible to build a society based only on charity, or that contains a proportion of products and services given freely through charity? At some time in the future, societies based on the currency of goodwill and charity might not even need money. There are parallels with and lessons to be drawn from the gift and barter economies, prevalent in some earlier cultures (Gregory, 1981; Mauss, 1990).

## 5.6 In education

Proper education aimed at developing the intellectual, moral and physical capabilities of young people is a foundational factor in social advancement and the development of sustainable societies (Olsson 2022; Marouli, 2021; UNESCO, 2012; Whitby, 2019). However, educational systems are often criticized for serving the state or the establishment rather than the needs of individual human beings. When Mahatma Ghandi was asked what he thought of education in Britain, he famously said that he thought it would be a good idea—highlighting his skepticism about the purpose and quality of formal education in serving broader human development.

According to award-winning teacher John Taylor Gatto, compulsory schooling since the last century has primarily aimed at dumbing children down rather than liberating them by encouraging critical thinking and individual creativity (Gatto, 2017; Gatto etc, 2000). The aim was to produce a class of ideal factory workers who didn't ask questions, could be easily manipulated and controlled, would get into debt easily and grow the economy by buying things they didn't need. Gatto proposes that an alternative system is needed with a different kind of teacher—one that genuinely cares for students and nurtures responsible individuals with free will and moral integrity (Gatto, 2003).

Education that aims at providing for the best interests of children is an invaluable gift given by teachers to young people as an opportunity to learn and develop their talents so that they might live happy and rewarding lives and contribute to society and the greater human development in positive ways. Charity can play a significant part in the development of education in many ways, for example:

- **Philanthropy:** Schools are constantly in need of financial support, and charitable funds can significantly enhance conditions and the quality of teaching. As educational resources become more accessible online, financial contributions are especially valuable for expanding technological infrastructure, particularly in remote and off-grid areas. A notable example is Andrew Carnegie, who later in life donated 80% of his personal fortune to establish more than 2,500 public libraries across America, exemplifying the impactful role of philanthropy in education.
- **Community support:** Community support plays a vital role in enhancing educational environments by encouraging community members and families to contribute their time, resources, and skills. Through charitable efforts, improvements such as playing fields, gymnasiums, classrooms, parkways, and driveways can be developed or upgraded, significantly enhancing school infrastructure. Such collaborative efforts foster a stronger sense of community and create better learning spaces for students.
- **Encouragement and support:** By fostering a nurturing environment, caring teachers can help students overcome various challenges, build self-esteem, and reach their full potential through compassionate guidance. This supportive approach makes learning a safe, enjoyable, and meaningful experience for children, laying the essential foundation for their overall growth, development, and success.
- **Favorable judgements:** In the Century dictionary (Whitney, 1889), charity is defined in clause 6 as 'liberality or allowance in judging others; an inclination towards favorable judgements.' This highlights the importance of a charitable mindset in teaching that would give encouragement and positive judgement, especially when children make mistakes, that promotes learning (positive charity), and refrains from negative criticism that can undermine children's motivation (negative charity).

The ethics embodied by a school, its teachers, and its classroom activities significantly influence the moral development of children. A school culture rooted in charity can nurture a generation of young people inclined to build a society that is peaceful, fair, and just. Acts of charity in interactions with others—such as brotherly love, kindness, and compassion for those who learn more slowly—and the practice of giving gifts to strengthen community bonds all play vital roles in shaping moral character.

In cultivating a charitable mindset in children, teachers should promote consideration and respect beyond the human sphere to include kindness toward animals and caring for the environment, promoting sustainability, stewardship and compassion (Trimmer, 2023). Educational exercises, stories, and lessons should guide children away from self-centeredness, fostering appreciation, empathy, and valuing others as virtues that build a better society.

To promote moral growth and the cultivation of charity in children within state schools, such initiatives would need to originate in the educational department. This requires political will and commitment to introduce such policies, which would be implemented by the heads of local schools. In privately-run schools, morality and charity can be integrated more freely into the curriculum, with the school's culture shaped directly by the head teachers.

The specific methods for encouraging moral growth are important but fall outside the scope of this study. However, it is broadly understood that the fundamental goal is to nurture and guide children's innate inclinations in positive ways, without imposing upon or suppressing their natural development. Many textbooks offer insights and guidelines in this, emphasizing the importance of specific moral virtues in healthy character development.

Books such as *The Book of Virtues* by William J. Bennett and the classical *Easop's Fables* contain many insights and stories that can promote healthy moral growth in children of all ages. Essential texts such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *The Republic* by Plato and later works such as *The Metaphysics of Morals* by Immanuel Kant provide a foundation for more advanced study of ethics and moral philosophy, the development of moral awareness, capabilities of moral reasoning and education in these areas. William Damon's *The Moral Child* is often regarded as giving a broad study and discussion of moral development combined with empirical studies and psychological assessment.

Although it is important to avoid moral supremacy, which has historically led to many negative consequences in society, and instead foster values of tolerance and respect, it is equally vital to recognize that certain moral virtues are objectively necessary for humans to lead balanced, rational, peaceful, and sustainable lives. Along with charity, the capital virtues patience and diligence are widely recognized as fundamental qualities that facilitate learning and underpin a productive and successful life. According to the Century dictionary, patience is the quality that enables individuals to endure difficulties and to wait calmly without discontent, while diligence is the ability to make constant and earnest efforts to accomplish what is undertaken, while giving due attention to achieve the best possible results (Whitney, 1889).

The cultivation of charity realigns individuals in their relationships and community, tending to reduce criminality and enhance equity and economic equality, highlighting goodwill and compassion instead of greed, envy, and competition. All strata of society benefit from charity as it redefines values that are more humane and tolerant and can embody a purpose that transcends material wealth and enables individuals to build their own identity around the greater good and the future of humanity.

Environmental sustainability practices—such as recycling, proper waste disposal and processing, avoiding littering, pollution prevention protocols, and adopting sustainable technologies and alternatives—can be related to students not merely as social duties or moral obligations but as natural expressions of goodwill and compassion for the planet and for the other creatures that we share the ecosystems with. Viewing sustainability through this lens encourages a more personal and heartfelt commitment to sustainability and a deepening appreciation of the environment and how it functions to sustain life.

While monetary donations and aid, can provide immediate relief and ease short-term hardships, lasting progress requires education, empowering individuals to understand and address their own challenges, equipping them with skills to organize and improve their lives and communities independently, helping build healthy, sustainable societies. School projects can promote and inspire charitable thinking and activities, serving as platforms for dialogue and discussion about human development and our relationship with the Earth.

## 6. Discussion

According to Dante, who drew upon Greek, Roman, and Christian philosophy, humans cannot attain inner peace and harmony or social peace and harmony without the moral virtue of charity. Thomas Aquinas viewed charity as the selfless desire to do good for others, seeing it as a way for humans to partake in God's love for humanity, and emphasized that when acts of charity are genuine and sincere, they honor the dignity of those receiving aid and reflect the true virtue of the giver, fostering mutual respect and moral integrity.

The importance of sincerity is also highlighted in the Buddhist Pali Canon, in which the *Discourse on Giving* states that ‘When one gives, one should do so with a mind free from attachment, and without expecting anything in return’, and the *Discourse on Loving-Kindness* states ‘Let one cultivate a boundless heart, free from hatred and ill will, with a mind imbued with kindness and sincerity.’ This sincerity ensures that acts of charity contribute to the giver’s spiritual development as well as the well-being of others.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante describes the capital vices as persuading man to act in ways that produce discord and disharmony—the characterizations of sin described in *Inferno*. The structure of Purgatory suggests that the Fall of man is a process of moral decay that starts with lust and progresses through the other capital vices to pride. This in turn suggests that a lack of charity is a result of a process of moral decay that starts with lust—the excessive desire for luxury and sensual and sexual pleasure (in earlier lists of capital vices lust was called by the Latin *luxuria*): striving for luxury and self-gratification develops a self-centered mindset and causes poverty in the world by taking too much from what is available.

According to Adam Curtis, consumerism began in the early 20th century when Edward Bernays used the psychological insights of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, to manipulate the unconscious desires of people through advertising, to get them to buy things they didn’t need (Curtis, 2002). This subversion of human rationality has eroded authentic human values and created a world that, by normalizing material excess and luxury, has unbalanced and exhausted ecosystems. While returning to only basic needs might be too austere, self-restraint and moderation can help restore rationality to our lives.

Many empirical studies have aimed to understand the role of moral virtues and vices within human psychology (e.g., Kristjansson, 2015), examining how individuals perceive issues such as responsibility and prosperity. These studies frequently explore moral conflicts and dilemmas, as well as cultural differences in customs and traditions. Positive psychology posits that moral character—encompassing virtues like courage, temperance, and compassion—is fundamental to defining human identity and unlocking the potential for flourishing.

Excessive profit-taking is one factor that fuels unsustainable practices, such as offshoring labor, violating environmental regulations, reducing salaries, and undermining employment opportunities. This contributes to societal division, animosity, and tension, which can escalate into aggressive resistance and revolution as in France at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Cultivating a more charitable mindset as a national characteristic would eliminate these practices, fostering a more stable, sustainable and resilient society.

Current levels of unrest in the world are extreme with tensions building like those in the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In a 1919 lecture Rudolf Steiner called for a new human mindset to steer the world in a different direction from the path that led to World War I (Steiner, 2008). The current study proposes that a new mindset should emphasize charity—not merely as giving alms, but as a moral virtue serving as a foundational principle for ethical behavior and social responsibility. This would ease tensions and bring people together in friendship rather than perpetuating animosity. If such a movement could become institutionalized in education and government policies, society could rescue itself from the path it is on and guide humanity towards greater unity and peace.

In *Purgatorio*, Marco Lombardo explains that much of the world’s unrest and turmoil is a result of poor moral leadership. When people in prominent positions such as politicians and world leaders pursue opulent lifestyles and consume excessive resources

that drive a wider scarcity, it not only reflects a lack of charity but also sets a harmful example for others, who tend to follow suit. Likewise, when wealthy people show charity by supporting social development, it encourages others to do the same. It also helps reduce resentment and shows that wealth can be used positively to benefit everyone. Instead of causing division, wealth can become a tool for helping society grow and improve.

The moral virtue of charity has the power to bring people together. This is evident in numerous instances, such as natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis, when individuals from around the world send aid, travel to assist rescue efforts, and participate in rebuilding communities. Such acts reveal a deeper unifying principle within us and suggest that while the absence of charity contributes to division, cultivation of charity fosters unity and genuine connection among people.

Across the world, widespread protests in major cities and social media campaigns are highlighting a growing unified stance against the ongoing devastation in Palestine and Ukraine. Since the beginning of 2025, demonstrations have drawn over 300,000 people in Rome, over 100,000 in The Hague, over 600,000 in London, and over 2,000,000 in Dhaka (ACLED, 2025b). The Global March to Gaza and the Freedom Flotilla are further examples of human solidarity with other humans that are subject to cruel treatment and oppression.

The size of these gatherings and the intensity of their conviction suggest that our collective humanity is becoming a powerful force for good, moving individuals and nations towards unity through empathy, love, and compassion. This is consistent with the prediction of de Chardin that humanity will unite at some future time into a single higher consciousness through love (de Chardin, 2008). As a natural expression of these forces, charity may be the primary pathway to a peaceful, just and sustainable future. As charity is a capital virtue it will always incline any transformation of society to the good.

Racism and apartheid reflect a profound lack of charity. In South Africa the apartheid government was abolished in 1994. In Palestine, the situation has degenerated into what is widely identified as genocide (Albanese, 2024; UNHRC, 2025). This deeply disturbing human catastrophe reflects a major failure in international relations and cooperation. While it is essential to achieve a peaceful resolution to this crisis at the earliest possible time, Dante's thesis asserts that bringing an end to this kind of inhumanity requires a moral transformation of those responsible for it. Those who finance, support, carry out, and profit from war and genocide, need to experience genuine remorse and possess a sincere desire to repent, while the international community and spiritual leaders must emphasise the cultivation of humility and charity as a moral basis for lasting peace and justice (Amnesty International, 2025).

Building solidarity and community networks are effective ways for individuals and communities to provide charitable support both locally and globally. After World War II, many European towns and cities established sister city relationships to promote healing, encourage cultural exchange, and prevent future conflicts. A similar approach, under the principles of charity—such as ‘sponsor a community’ or ‘sponsor a tribe’—could involve towns and cities in developed countries forming partnerships with communities or tribes in developing nations to support their growth and development. When implemented responsibly and compassionately, this can complement the efforts of larger charitable organizations and help create a web of interconnected human experience worldwide—fostering mutual learning and cooperation across cultures.

In the first Canto of *Inferno*, Dante relates how every time he tries to do the right thing and make meaningful progress in his life, he encounters three beasts that obstruct his way—a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. These are commonly interpreted as representing unrefined forces within the three aspects of the soul—intellect, will and emotions. These forces are not aligned with true progress toward salvation and enlightenment and therefore present themselves as obstacles (Wicksteed, 1921):

- Leopard: improper and dishonest use of intellect for deception, trickery and manipulation that undermines trust and integrity in relationships and society.
- Lion: ill-tempered condition of the will that resorts to violence and brute force, leading to conflict, war, and power struggles that obstruct peaceful development.
- She-wolf: lack of self-control of the lower passions produces greed, materialism, hoarding and excess, which divert focus from moral and spiritual growth.

These beasts symbolize destructive tendencies in each person that threaten the collective harmony, wellbeing and evolution of humanity. They keep societies divided, impede cooperation, and prioritize self-interest over the common good. Dante's treatise emphasizes that the purpose of life involves the transformation of these three beasts into wisdom, courage and prudence, through lifelong learning and personal growth.

Charity, when humility allows, offers hope, and fosters understanding and dialogue, encouraging a vision that transcends our differences, helping humanity overcome the three beasts and progress towards an enlightened future. Dialogue embodies Logos as each word represents a specific aspect or component of the cosmos, and logical sentences represent fragments of universal order; this means that through dialogue it is always possible to learn, develop understanding and work things out (Hülsz, 2013; Whitney, 1889).

## 7. Conclusion

Charity is a fundamental moral virtue that enables individuals to foster positive change both locally and globally to enhance the sustainability of human existence on Earth. The desire to do good for others, motivated by love and compassion, makes charity a 'missing link' in sustainable development that might otherwise tend towards tardiness.

Goodwill, kindness, and mercy mobilize knowledge, technology and resources to bring about sustainable solutions and to restrain unsustainable practices. And the goodwill of charitable relations between individuals and between nations reduces hostility and facilitates dialogue and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

In the short term, acts of charity alleviate suffering and hardship, and for longer-term solutions charity is guided by a vision of a peaceful, just and sustainable world to provide education and support that empowers people to build healthy, vibrant societies. In a broader sense, compassion, goodwill, kindness, and mercy can be extended to all living beings—to humans, animals, plants, and the planet—to bring relief, support and healing.

Philosophically, charity is regarded as a divine virtue that enables humans to live and grow in harmony with the moral order of the universe. Practically, charity involves acts of selfless giving and compassion that alleviate suffering and hardship, foster justice and social harmony, and contribute to the common good. Gradual integration of charity into all levels and aspects of society will foster a culture rich in goodwill, compassion and kindness, which are vital components of a healthy human society that can coexist peacefully and live sustainably.



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