

## **Synergy of “to be” and “to have” as a critical point of sustainable development: A personalist perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This text presents a personalist interpretation of sustainable development by examining the tension between “to be” and “to have”. It argues that modern consumerism distorts human potential, fuels environmental degradation, and undermines social cohesion. Personalism, rooted in the dignity, rationality, and freedom of the human person, offers a path toward integrating material needs with spiritual and moral growth. Thinkers such as Mounier, Maritain, Marcel, and Fromm highlight that possession is legitimate only when subordinated to authentic personal flourishing and responsibility toward others. Sustainable development becomes possible when individuals transcend egoistic consumption, cultivate moderation and solidarity, and orient both technological progress and economic activity toward the common good.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, personalism, consumerism, human dignity, to be vs. to have

### **Introduction**

Ensuring sustainable development is absolutely crucial for the future of our planet and for the well-being of present and future generations. Ignoring the challenges that stand in the way of such development – those related to climate change, the depletion of natural resources, interpersonal confrontations and conflicts, and social inequalities – inevitably leads humanity towards catastrophe. Abandoning the path of sustainable development also contradicts the entire history of humankind, which has been grounded in human rationality, freedom, and the striving for perfection. It seems to be a drama that the extraordinary technological progress at the beginning of the 21st century threatens humanity’s continued existence, stimulating not so much rational, effective, sustainable development as irrational consumerism that reifies a significant portion of the population (Buschmann, 2020, pp. 196–197). Equally destructive factors for such development, which are closely linked to consumerism, include significant social inequalities, environmental degradation, and, finally, the waging of wars with weaponry offering previously unimaginable possibilities.

If the aim of sustainable development is to preserve harmony among technological progress, the economy, society, and the environment, then a personalist model of the human being may play an important role in achieving this aim. Its foundation is the human person – a rational and free subject endowed with particular dignity and responsibility: for oneself, for the economy, for the condition of social life, and, ultimately, also for the non-human environment. Personalism opens a space for an optimal synergy of the strategies of sustainable development understood as a common good, where the economy and its stable growth, care for the natural environment, society, and individual people mutually complement one another, forming a coherent whole (Novak, 1989; Konstańczak, 2023, pp. 162–164).

In striving for harmony among various spheres of life, sustainable development corresponds with the idea of the personalist development of the human being, which presupposes his/her integral physical, spiritual, intellectual, and social growth. This aligns with the recognition of the human obligation to care for a broadly understood environmental balance as a common good that conditions the possibility of development and a dignified life for future generations. Necessary here are actions promoting the preservation of natural resources, the creation of conditions for active participation in social life, the promotion of ethical practices in business and the economy, social justice, and the elimination of inequalities (Kalajtžidis, 2025, pp. 236,

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239–240). A crucial point in humanity's choice of the path of sustainable development – and the actualization of the human person's potential it involves – is its response to the fundamental dilemma it faces: to be or to have?

### **Consumerism**

Although the dilemma of “to be” and “to have”, arising from the complexity of human nature, is inscribed in the life of every person, confronting it has become particularly difficult in the era of consumerism. The euphoric acclamation of the age of affluence is accompanied today by “a morose, moralizing, ‘critical’ counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society and the tragic end to which it inevitably dooms society as a whole” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 195). This passage aptly captures the inner division of the postmodern individual, who often limits himself/herself to consumption, yet is at the same time concerned about the degradation of one's own personal potential it entails.

The virtually unlimited access to material goods seems to foster the transformation of many people into slaves who expect nothing more than maximum satisfaction in the sphere of sensory experience. In postmodernity, strictly consumer-oriented needs, referring to only one dimension of human nature, have come to dominate even such areas as science, art, and religion (Jacyno, 2007, p. 56). Instead of serving as a means towards higher ends, consumer goods sometimes become ends in themselves, thereby restricting the personal nature of many individuals (Bauman, 2007, p. 122). Recognizing consumer choices as decisive for one's life and development, the unreflective *animal irrationalis*, vegetating inertly, views the natural environment, other people, and even himself/herself exclusively from this perspective. Possessing the possibility of easily discarding or replacing things and – not infrequently – even people, such an individual fails to attach proper significance to them.

In consequence, much as a pandemic spreads, a dysfunctional approach to consumption spreads, grounded in the technological and material-economic paradigm that dominates Zygmunt Bauman's “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2007, pp. 31–32). To this one must add the crisis of personal identity characteristic of the postmodern consumer, the preference for utilitarian attitudes, the lack of an objective axiology, the crisis of religion and secularization, the marginalization of dialogical attitudes, and, finally, the dominance of an oversimplified image of reality suggested by contemporary mass media.

In analyses of sustainable development, personalism draws upon its contemporary theoretical foundations. Within this intellectual tradition, particular emphasis is placed on the need for a more rational approach and on incorporating the “post-growth” paradigm, which challenges the dogma that infinite economic growth (GDP) is necessary on a planet with finite resources (Kallis et al., 2025). Grounded in the dignity of the person, personalism underscores, as central to sustainable development, the importance of well-being, sufficiency, and a philosophy of “enough” rather than “more”. In seeking a golden mean between “being” and “having”, this perspective remains consistent with sustainable development theory, which advocates dematerializing prosperity, that is, a shift away from an emphasis on possession (Post-Growth Sufficiency).

### **Personalism: A characterization**

In the postmodern reality, the possibility of preserving an adequate balance –indispensable for sustainable development – between “to be” and “to have” is opened up by adopting the path of personalism. This broadly understood system of thought proposes reflection on human nature and the real needs that arise from it, as well as on a person's responsibility towards other persons and towards non-human reality (Wolska, 2015, p. 212). Within this perspective, all dimensions of humanity are realistically affirmed, including those related to bodily aspects, about which we know far more today through the explorations of the natural sciences. Nevertheless,

personalism emphasizes that, despite the enormous progress of these sciences, they are hardly capable of adequately explaining the full complexity of human nature (Bartnik, 1995, p. 30).

From the standpoint of personalism, frequently inspired by Catholic thought, every partial definition of the human being, as well as every partial definition of sustainable development – regardless of its provenance, whether materialistic or spiritualistic – fails to grasp their full essence and ultimate aims. Omitting the spiritual dimension of the human being, just as omitting his/her bodily dimension, does not allow one to reasonably confront the fundamental dilemma that arises in the context of sustainable development: how to “have” in such a way as not to cease “to be”.

Appealing to human rationality and to the freedom adequate to it, personalism stands in opposition to consumerism, which is irrational and only apparently realizes human freedom. In consequence, an evident conflict – indeed a contradiction – becomes visible between consumerism and sustainable development. The excessive exploitation of natural resources characteristic of the former, along with the environmental degradation that follows, results in the depreciation of individuals and societies, as well as their personal potential and aspirations. Only conscious and responsible consumption, grounded in rational choices and in freedom “for something”, rather than merely “from something”, offers a chance to promote a sustainable approach to life.

This approach corresponds with the “to be” perspective, focused on activating the potential of every person and on building a lasting, responsible, and harmonious synergy between the individual, society, and the environment. The preference for the attitude of “to have” – often contrary to declarative affirmations in this regard – favors concentration on consumption and the accumulation of material goods that provide bodily pleasures. However, orienting one’s life towards “to have”, which brings a certain quantum of pleasure, produces dramatic consequences for sustainable development, since irrational consumption – fueling the desire for ever greater possession and ever more intense pleasure – results not only in the mindless exploitation of natural resources and the degradation of the environment, but also in the depreciation of the dignity of the person on various levels.

### **Dilemma of “to be” or “to have” as *Specifica Differentialis* of human nature**

Confronting the dilemma of “to be” or “to have” largely determines the existential horizon of a person. *Homo sapiens*, discovering both his close bond with – but also clear distinctness from – the surrounding reality, has always reflected on the ambivalence of his own nature that results from this fact. In satisfying the needs related to corporeality, he simultaneously recognizes – at least incidentally – the dangers this poses to his spiritual sphere. He is incessantly troubled by questions such as: Is it possible to be and to have simultaneously? Can an enterprising and industrious person, who multiplies his/her wealth, still truly “be”? Is someone uninterested in sophisticated consumption automatically closer to pure existence?

Unequivocal answers to these questions are hardly possible, since humans, by nature, are incomplete beings who are actually incapable of satisfying all their needs. At the same time, however, only the human being is aware of the necessity of striving to “have” in such a way as not to cease “to be”. Possessing things and goods does not in itself perfect the human subject and is not capable of enriching his/her “being”, that is, of actualizing the status of a person. Yet even a refined orientation towards “to be” does not constitute a person if the good of other persons disappears from his/her perspective. It is precisely coexistence with other rational and free persons that sets a natural limit, as it were, to the human inclination to possess, while simultaneously opening broader perspectives for sustainable development.

The solution to the dilemma over “to be” or “to have” does not lie in the ability to abandon possession in favor of being. The point is not to choose some illusory path of abnegation or total renunciation of material possession (which is incompatible with human nature), but rather

to avoid losing the sense of one's being for the sake of one's possessions alone. For if we are only what we possess, then who are we if we have not managed to acquire anything, or if at some point we lost our entire sphere of "having"?

Raising such questions and seeking answers to them has certainly had a rich philosophical history. The conviction that the synergy between "to be" and "to have" must be preserved as a necessary condition for the development of a person has been addressed, among others, by Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain, whereas Gabriel Marcel and Erich Fromm went so far as to claim that human existence unfolds within a space defined by these two antagonistic modes of existence.

Mounier opposed an excessively sharp opposition between the categories of possession and being, maintaining that one cannot "be" without having anything, although one's being can never be defined solely by what one possesses. His aim was not to pursue a utopian form of asceticism or a complete renunciation of material goods, but rather to avoid becoming subordinated to possessions by forming an adequate attitude in the possessor and user of such (Mounier, 1948, pp. 50–60).

According to Erich Fromm, the satisfaction of the pursuit of pleasure has ceased in our times to be the privilege of a minority and has become accessible to more than half, and an ever-growing part, of the human population. With the consolidation, especially in affluent countries, of the status of the human being as a consumer, he/she experiences only an illusory sense of happiness, while unconsciously suffering from boredom and passivity, remaining a passive and greedy absorber of consumer goods (Fromm, 1992, pp. 84–86). For if the human being "is what he has", and only through consumption "reassures himself that 'he [truly] is', he will not wish to renounce it (Fromm, 1986, p. 124). Unafraid to formulate sharp conclusions, Fromm maintained that the culture in which we live is necrophiliac in its structure, since it is oriented towards the production of things, and automates human actions so that people will ever more flawlessly produce what can be bought and sold, thereby gaining, if only momentary relief (Fromm, 1964, p. 59).

In Marcel's personalist philosophy – directly inspired by Christianity and rejecting nihilism, as well as the absurdity of human existence in the manner of Sartre – the proper attitude toward life consists in recognizing it as a gift that must be cared for and from which one may benefit (Warzeszak, 2009, p. 84). The experience of ontological contingency – often concealed – and the metaphysical anxiety associated with it remind the human being that he/she does not live only for one's own self, that he/she requires reference to another human "You" and, ultimately, to the Absolute "Thou", to God, who constitutes fullness in relation to human deficiencies (Konkowska, 2015, p. 100). An important role in choosing the path of sustainable development may be played by the struggle of the human being with his/her own body, as Marcel emphasizes as a fundamental aspect of the process of striving toward the fullness of being a person (Marcel, 1950, p. 118). It is bodily needs that establish a kind of boundary between the moderate "being" that opens space for sustainable development and the egoistic and often irrational "having" that decidedly does not favor it (Marcel, 2002, p. 101; 1950, pp. 97–98).

Marcel encourages a person, while respecting his/her ontic status as a pilgrim (*homo viator*), to read in it a call to transcend oneself and to create subject-to-subject relations with other beings, also in a supernatural perspective. The person, by virtue of his/her very nature, is constituted by the will to surpass everything that he/she already is, for his/her motto is not only *sum* but *sursum* – not merely "I am", but "I rise upwards" (Marcel, 1951, p. 26). With this upward movement of a person through "being" rather than mere "having", so significant for the choice of the path of sustainable development, Marcel associates the abandonment of greed and egoism in favor of dialogue and the building of bonds. While preferring the attitude of "to be", Marcel does not claim that some form of "pure being", devoid of any admixture of possession, is possible. Actually, throughout one's life, one must liberate oneself from the threatening

slavery of possession, a temptation experienced by all humans, even while recognizing that the future of the world is conditioned by humanity's choice of the path of sustainable development. Since "pure" being would entail rejecting our participation in the world, it appears as an unattainable ideal rather than a real possibility of complete renunciation of possession. Even without owning any material goods, one may remain a person oriented towards "having", just as one may "have" much while in fact possessing nothing (Marcel, 1949, pp. 84, 134).

### **"To have" in a personalist context**

Although from the perspective of personalism, which in large measure follows Marcel, the essence of a person is defined more by the sphere of "to be" than by that of "to have", this does not in any way imply a depreciation of the latter dimension and the needs associated with it, for a person is co-constituted by both of them. In the context of the hopes for attaining the aims connected with sustainable development, the fundamental point of reference within the sphere of possession is respect for the goods of other persons in this domain. Personalism rejects the thesis, promoted since the Enlightenment, that the human being – egoistic and asocial by nature – forms conventional social bonds out of utilitarian prudence (Hobbes, 1996; Rousseau, 1979). In the spirit of classical thought, personalism views a human being as one oriented towards communal life with others by virtue of his/her very nature, not through a special type of convention. Without social coexistence, the human being would never have emerged from the state of animality – that is, from pure "having" – and would never have become a self-conscious person aware of his/her ontic status and striving to "be" more through the choice of the demanding path of sustainable development (Buber, 1937, pp. 37–38; Levinas, 1985).

A human person, just as sustainable development itself, is constituted by a harmonious synthesis of internal (biological) and external (social) factors (Sztompka, 2016, pp. 30–31). An important role is played here by the opposition of "person" vs. "thing", corresponding with that formed by "to be" vs. "to have". Referring to the space of the human community, which may be called a "civilization of persons", John Paul II contrasts it with a utilitarian "civilization of things", in which persons are treated as objects (John Paul II, 1981, No. 13). The personalization of social life – which guarantees sustainable development – will not occur without respect for the fundamental thesis that a person is a supreme value, incomparable with the world of things (John Paul II, 1980, pp. 11–14). Possessing things and goods may certainly provide a certain quantum of pleasure to an individual, or even to numerous individuals, but it will not ensure sustainable development if the "having" of some individuals involves a diminution of the "having" of others, and especially of the "being" of all (John Paul II, 1987, No. 3).

Certainly, this is not an easy matter, as Maritain realistically observes: "if human society were a society of pure persons, the good of society and the good of each person would be one and the same good. But man is very far from being a pure person. The human person is an unfortunate material individual, an animal who is born in an infinitely more depraved state than all the other animals" (Maritain, 1966, p. 295).

For this very reason, the proper functioning of all spheres of social-political life – including the aspect of sustainable development – must be grounded in the respect for the integrally understood common good. It is evident that the achievement of the common good, which sustainable development undoubtedly is, will be possible only if the diverse goods of individuals, communities, and the non-human environment are respected (John Paul II, 1987, No. 38–40). It is worth recalling here also Pope Francis, who, proposing a contemporary form of the common good, points to responsible investment that respects the care for the environment and the solidarity with the poor and the excluded: "Investments of this sort are meant to have positive social repercussions on local communities, such as the creation of jobs, access to energy, training, and increased agricultural productivity. The financial return for investors tends to be more moderate than in other types of investment. The logic underlying these innovative

forms of intervention is one which “acknowledges the ultimate connection between profit and solidarity, the virtuous circle existing between profit and gift [...]” (Francis, 2014). At the same time, one cannot overlook the fact— also in the context of sustainable development – that although the common good is superior to partial and individual goods, it cannot be imposed in the manner characteristic of various totalitarian systems.

From the perspective of personalism, serious doubts arise – also in the context of the dilemma of “to be” or “to have” – with regard to technological progress that appears to know no limits. Leaving aside the question of artificial intelligence, too complex for cursory analysis, it is difficult to overlook the fact that technological advancement, which increases access to consumer goods, may come into conflict with sustainable development. Although the human being clearly demonstrates his intelligence by developing science and technology, by focusing solely on this plane, he cannot find answers to questions about the meaning of his existence, nor can he identify the indispensable factors for sustainable development. Progress in itself does not generate a new human being or a new society, nor does it guarantee authentic, sustainable development. As Joseph Ratzinger rightly emphasizes, we do not rise to a higher level of humanity simply by using ever more perfect tools developed over the centuries (Ratzinger, 2007, p. 62).

Equally suggestive in this regard is Pope Francis, who does not call for renouncing technical progress and returning to a cave-dwelling era, but rather for slowing its march so as to restore the great values and goals that have been annihilated by the megalomaniacal and unrestrained character of such progress (Francis, 2015, No. 114).

Technological progress makes sense only when, while fostering the integral development of the person, it simultaneously offers hope for the realization of plans for sustainable development. Such development must have both its origin and its end in spiritually mature individuals – persons who are conscious of their personal dignity, responsible, and open to others. The choice of the values that genuinely satisfy the person – and, hence, the entire sphere of both “having” and “being” – requires an orientation towards a hierarchically construed order of values. In the context of sustainable development, evil does not consist in the human aspiration “to have”, but in the “having” that is devoid of a hierarchy of goods, i.e., the “having” that fails to be recognized as subordinated to “being” (John Paul II, 1987, No. 28).

### **“To be”: A transcendent dimension of human nature**

Sustainable development should appeal to those personal attributes of the human being that differentiate him/her from the non-personal world. Only the human being, as a rational and free person, is capable of self-direction due to his/her inner spiritual self (“I”). Distinct from the world of things by virtue of rationality and freedom, the human person is “someone”, not “something”; he/she is a subject capable of shaping both oneself and the surrounding world, thereby ensuring its sustainable development (Kowalczyk, 2008, p. 315). The person’s “mastery” over himself/herself and over the world of things – for which he/she bears responsibility – becomes manifest in the conscious confrontation of the “I” with what is “mine” (Wojtyła, 1987, pp. 326–327).

Personal existence is intrinsically connected with proactive “acting” (including actions for the sake of sustainable development), rather than mere inert “experiencing”, which deprives the person of real influence over the broadly understood shape of reality (Wojtyła, 1976, p. 7). By nature, the person is able to transcend primitive consumerism and attain autonomy both with regard to other people and the things he/she needs (Wojtyła, 1986, p. 42). As Józef Tischner observes, “true on-stage participation in the drama which is life demands of man that he be something far more than a thing or a being-in-itself” (Tischner, 2004, p. 159). The transcendence of the person manifests itself in a constant striving toward fuller and more sustainable development through self-surpassing toward values more demanding than strictly

consumerist ones (Mounier, 1953, pp. 84–85).

The dilemmas inherent in this choice – which also determine one’s attitude towards “being” and “having” – are expressed with striking clarity in the ever-relevant words of Roman Ingarden: “Man lives on the boundary of two different worlds: that of nature and that which is specifically human. He is, as it were, compelled to live upon the substratum of Nature and within its domain; yet, by virtue of his special essence, he must transcend its limits, though he can never fully satisfy his inner need of being human. Such is the tragic fate of man. But in this very fact, his true essence is revealed: his genius and the finitude of his being” (Ingarden, 1987, pp. 17–18).

The inner rupture of human nature – the vacillation between the genius that arises from rationality and the fall into animality – becomes particularly evident in the sphere of consumer needs. If the human being renounces the effort of discovering what enables him/her to transcend the surrounding natural world, he/she is no longer capable of responsibly addressing the dilemma of “to be” vs. “to have” and may even fail to perceive it at all. Since humans do have an animal dimension, consumption constitutes an important element of their existence. However, if they reduce their lives solely to consumption and identify the pursuit of pleasure with ultimate happiness, they significantly narrow their personal existence and forfeit the opportunity to sustain humanity’s development.

An important remedy for the negative consequences of escalating consumerism, which threaten sustainable development, is deep spirituality that transcends the traditionally understood religious rituals. Just as the rejection of God does not automatically result in immoral behavior, religion in itself actually provides no guarantee of moral conduct. It is nevertheless difficult to overlook the fact that the intention to make believers morally better and more aware of their personal dignity is found in virtually every religion. By emphasizing the supernatural roots of moral norms – which generally correspond with the widely recognized principles of social conduct – religion can foster social morality and thus directly support sustainable development.

As Benedict XVI writes, “God [...] also establishes the transcendent dignity of men and women and feeds their innate yearning to ‘be more’” (Benedict XVI, 2009, No. 29). Hence, a society of affluence also requires renewal in the sphere of spirituality (Benedict XVI, 2009, No. 76; Maritain, 1990). One may agree with Pope Francis that “[God] takes us to where humanity is most wounded, where men and women, beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an answer to the question of life’s meaning” (Francis, 2018, No. 15).

The spirituality grounded in Christian personalism is associated with a holistic, contemplative attitude to life, an alternative to the consumerist tendency to prioritize quality of life above all else. In a world filled with the “winners” of the consumer race and those who conceal their sadness at having failed in it, and who show little interest in sustainable development, there is a growing expectation of those who refuse to participate in such a race. Certainly, this does not mean that a believing person is by definition better oriented towards resolving the dilemma of “to be” vs. “to have” since hypocrisy linked to faith translates into – and is especially expressed in – the moral sphere, where consumerism constitutes so serious a threat today.

### **Conclusion**

When analyzing postmodern reality, one may discern not only the consumerist syndrome that deepens the crisis of the human being, but also symptoms of deconsumption, that is, attempts to limit and rationalize consumption, to render it conscious, responsible, and ethical, as well as to align it with the real characteristics of a given consumer (Bywalec & Rudnicki, 2002, p. 143). A certain segment of consumers, guided by reason, appears to be wary of massified consumption, which is irrational in biological and socio-cultural terms. Whereas

overconsumption produces a passive consumer, highly susceptible to external stimuli, deconsumption demands far greater individual awareness, as well as a preference for ethical, social, and ecological considerations. It is, however, difficult to overlook the fact that consumer society shows little tolerance for those among its members who prefer a deconsumption-oriented lifestyle, since they may, quite prosaically, constitute a “serious threat” to economic growth (Loreau, 2005, pp. 18–24).

From the perspective of personalism, asceticism and restraint remain the fundamental deconsumption factors that make it possible to find space for sustainable development – that is, to “be” more within the vast sphere of consumer needs. Certainly, such asceticism need not assume any religious form; it may be grounded in self-control, simplicity, balance, straightforwardness, the disciplining of affects, and self-limitation. The point is not to promote an inferior or less intense lifestyle – on the contrary. In fact, we experience each moment more deeply when we do not confine ourselves solely to the pursuit of happiness here and now, focusing exclusively on ourselves and on our needs within the sphere of “having”. By appreciating the whole of reality, one can more fully rejoice even in the simplest things and relationships with other persons. Such an attitude of joyful restraint, however, requires inner peace, which may translate into concern for the common good – today, such a common good consists, above all, in walking the path of sustainable development. In a world of egoistic consumers, filled with inner anxiety and struggling to secure their own sphere of “having”, sustainable development will remain nothing but an empty slogan.

The scale of consumerism in the Western world is forcefully expressed in Daniel Quinn’s statement: “Man lived harmlessly on this planet for some three million years, but the Takers have brought the whole thing to the point of collapse in only five hundred generations” (Quinn, 1992, p. 106). Seeking to avert this catastrophe and to sustain hope that humanity may continue along the path of sustainable development, we cannot remain indifferent to the question: to be or to have? While searching for an answer, one should distance oneself both from the utopian proposals that call for a complete renunciation of possession as allegedly threatening “being”, and from those tendencies – considerably stronger today – that seem to disregard “being” in favor of “having”.

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