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The Phenomenology of Sustainability: From Ontic Indicators to the Search for Ontological Meaning

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This study examines how sustainability should be understood not merely as a set of measurements and targets, but as a more profound philosophical concept. By temporarily suspending the instrumental and technical approaches dominant in current sustainability discourse, the study aims to uncover the fundamental conditions upon which the concept's meaning rests. A phenomenological method was adopted in the study, examining how sustainability is experienced as a matter of 'meaning' and 'value' and how it is linked to a sense of responsibility. The study's central argument is that measurable indicators (ontic level) gain legitimacy only when they are compatible with this deeper existential ground (ontological level) that gives them meaning. Through temporal consciousness and narratives, it is demonstrated how the act of 'sustaining' creates a continuity between the past, present and future.

Keywords: phenomenology of sustainability, ontic–ontological distinction, time consciousness, value ethics, legitimacy of indicators

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability can be grounded not only as a collection of instrumental goals but also as a philosophical phenomenon. Therefore, the meaning of the concept, the way it is experienced, and the conditions on which it rests must be openly questioned. This understanding requires moving beyond numerical indicators (ontic level) to the existential ground that gives them meaning (ontological level) (Alsaigh 2021: 1; Öhlén 2023: 2). The phenomenological approach investigates how awareness of value and responsibility is formed in daily life and emphasises that ethical judgments cannot be fully expressed through measurable metrics (Bruzzone 2022: 178; Batat 2021: 918). Entrenched habits and bodily practices fuel environmental inaction, making visible blind spots in policy discourse. The experience of time is central: continuity, expectation, and future orientation are the fundamental existential dimensions that constitute the meaning of sustainability. A technical-calculatory way of

thinking, however, tends to narrow this meaning (Lally 2021; Glazebrook 2021: 2). A sense of responsibility towards future generations strengthens individuals' motivation to take action.

Sustainability is not merely a set of indicators, but a phenomenon that emerges from the conditions under which meaning and value emerge. This study aims to position the concept beyond technical and administrative regulations on a deeper ontological basis (Hadjimichael 2023: 99). To maintain conceptual integrity, it temporarily distances itself from policy language and measurability-focused discourses, making the limits of instrumental reason visible (Takkinen 2025; Brown 2024: 585). The phenomenological approach explores the construction of meaning in everyday life. In this context, the concept of 'future generations' is treated as an ontological assertion of responsibility rather than a claim of rights. It aims to uncover aesthetic and value-based assumptions that are often overlooked in discussions about sustainability. The phenomenology of sustainability also challenges the fundamental claims of ecophenomenology at a conceptual level (Behrendt 2024: 14).

This study utilises a method that integrates descriptive phenomenology and a hermeneutic approach. In the first stage, the concept of sustainability is stripped of its instrumental approaches through reduction, reaching its essence (Franz 2022: 761). This methodological stance suspends measurability-focused discourses, allowing sustainability to be examined as a state of meaning-making rather than solely through quantitative indicators. The 'moderation' and 'adaptability' afforded by practical reason offer a form of value-based wisdom (Cadilha 2023: 292). The unique contribution of this study lies in its connection between practical reason and normative orientation, while grounding sustainability as a philosophical phenomenon. In the reduction that follows, the steps of description, horizon analysis, and hermeneutics are intended to provide a systematic and repeatable framework.

CONCEPTUAL CLARITY: 'PHENOMENA' AND 'SUSTAINABILITY'

In this research, sustainability is considered a directly experienced reality. This approach places the concept on the plane of meaning and appearance, which precede measurable outcomes. Direct experience emerges in the individual's relationship with the world and is enriched by bodily and perceptual contacts (Chevalier 2021: 273). Circular design renders the ethical dimension visible by transforming responsibility towards future generations into concrete practices. The critique of technological rationality reveals how the understanding of nature as a mere resource narrows our perception of the world (Villadsen 2024: 170). The Heideggerian concept of 'place-taking', however, highlights the ideas of moderation and shelter as a response to this narrowing. The temporal dimension of experience, combined with the narrative context, sheds light on the issue of continuity. The contribution of contact with nature to individual well-being forms the empirical basis for valuing it.

It could be argued that sustainability emerges as a process of 'opening'. This is, in a sense, the self-disclosure of the world's meaning. In this process of disclosure, not only do things become visible, but also the horizon of meaning expands (Ignatius 2022). In its relationship with meaning, sustainability is a fundamental experience that precedes technical indicators. It transcends measurable data and makes visible the human relationship with the world (Sadler 2025). Phenomenologically, this visibility occurs through language and meaning. This process deepens not only through intellectual but also through sensory-aesthetic engagement (Zahavi 2025: 5; Affifi 2024: 1041). The human–nature interaction ensures the maintenance of this

openness. This relationship forms the basis of the ethics of care and attention. Disclosure carries the risk of remaining invisible (Artmann 2023: 1). Therefore, sustainability is founded on semantic openness rather than technical criteria.

Understanding sustainability requires a shift from instrumentality to essence, grasping the future-oriented dynamics of values. This cannot be explained solely by metrics (Reeder 2021: 113; Danaher 2021). Ecophenomenology questions the limits of reductionism by viewing nature not only as a resource but also as a site where value is experienced. Design narratives access the essential dimension by asking 'how to live' (Lloyd 2024). This aligns with qualitative environmental psychology; experiential intensity offers a horizon of meaning that precedes metrics. Narrative supports a practical orientation by revealing the continuity dimension of sustainability. Thus, sustainability is grounded in ethical and temporal openness.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION AND INTERPRETATION

Phenomenological reduction brackets practical concerns, enabling a focus on the conditions of meaning. This method does not exclude concrete descriptions; on the contrary, it explores the grounds from which they derive meaning and allows for the understanding of essential structures (Giorgi 2021: 2). While methodological debates exist within phenomenological psychology, the fundamental principle is the suspension of preconceptions and the intuitive grasp of essences. Perceptual diversity helps distinguish unchanging essences (Barber 2021: 137; Bower 2023: 161). Reduction is not scepticism; it is remaining true to the phenomenon itself (Altobrando 2023: 651). It does not exclude quantitative data; it reveals the pre-meanings on which they are based. This approach elevates sustainability beyond technical objectives to a phenomenon where meaning and intentions are central.

In the phenomenological approach, sustainability is considered a phenomenon shaped by the meanings and intentions individuals hold toward the world. Human relationships with the world are established through shared orientations that develop within a shared living space (Kiverstein 2021). Intentionality expresses an individual's fundamental stance toward the world; bodily experiences and action possibilities define the boundaries of meaning. The enactive-ecological approach emphasises the intertwined nature of perception and action. Sustainability emerges here as the result of concrete action competencies. In everyday practices, conceptual stability is shaped by the dynamism of action. The action possibilities offered by the objects around us reflect the diversity of orientations (van Dijk 2021: 74). Shared patterns of intention and action, in turn, transform sustainability into a collective centre of meaning.

Sustainability is a phenomenon that gains meaning within the concept of a 'horizon'. It possesses a background of meaning shaped by experience, and future expectations (Moran 2024: 168). Horizons do not limit phenomena to the present; they constantly expand meaning with future possibilities. Expectations, possibilities and responsibility intersect on this ground. The horizon highlights the limitations of technical approaches while preserving the potential for expanding meaning (Marosan 2022: 107; Li 2022). The narrative structure of time reinforces the idea of continuity. Ecological reasoning emphasises value and moderation (Misawa 2023: 840). The ethical dimension of the horizon makes visible the intrinsic value of nature. In the phenomenological approach, sustainability becomes a dynamic horizon of meaning.

THE ONTIC–ONTOLOGICAL DISTINCTION IN SUSTAINABILITY

The ontic–ontological distinction separates the description of concrete phenomena from the investigation of the conditions of meaning of existence. In this distinction, methodological priority belongs to the ontological plane. In sustainability, the ontic level encompasses measurable data such as emission targets and indicators, while the ontological level questions the basis on which these data gain meaning (De Santis et al. 2020: 3). The phenomenological approach addresses this distinction based on consciousness and meaning. Therefore, sustainability should be considered a fundamental basis for meaning that precedes instrumental criteria. Conceptual frameworks clarify the theoretical and practical function of this distinction. Philosophy of technology draws attention to the risks of viewing nature as a mere resource (Li 2022). Eco-phenomenology, on the other hand, interprets nature as a meaningful field of interaction. Thus, sustainability gains an ontological foundation that goes beyond technical objectives and answers the question 'Why should we protect?'.

In sustainability, ontic indicators are numerical metrics that measure 'what' and 'how' things look. Their purpose is to monitor the situation and provide systematic information to support decision-making processes. This includes greenhouse gas inventories, emission concentrations, and reduction scenarios. Sustainable Development Goal indicators monitor a wide range of issues, from poverty to biodiversity. The OECD's 'How is Life?' report assesses well-being and sustainability with more than 80 indicators (OECD 2024). At the institutional level, GRI Standards provide transparency (GRI 2021), while the EU Taxonomy classifies environmental activities. The Science-Based Goals initiative outlines plans for achieving net zero. However, these measurement tools are reduced to mere sets of indicators without the underlying meaning.

TIMELINESS: DURATION, FUTURE ORIENTATION, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Intratemporal awareness creates a sense of continuity by integrating experience into a 'now-just-now' structure. This ensures the uninterrupted flow of meaning for sustainable action. Narrative time unites lived and cosmic time, organising future orientation (Franz 2022: 761). The delayed causality of the climate crisis creates a tension between loss and anticipation; ethical responsibility emerges in this context (Hepach 2023: 2011). Responsibility in the Anthropocene requires an attribution that combines traces of the past with the effects of the future (Le Chevallier 2024). Bodily temporality anchors the self and supports sustainable orientation. Intergenerational commitments institutionalise openness to the future within intratemporal consciousness (Halali et al. 2025). 'Extended solidarity' reinforces a sense of co-temporality with those who do not yet exist (Gómez-Franco 2024). Sustainability thus emerges as a phenomenon grounded in narrative continuity rather than measurable goals.

At the core of sustainability, the demand of future generations is an ontological claim, prior to law. This claim emerges within the horizon of meaning that ensures the continuity of existence. Future orientation does not limit sustainability to the present; it locates it in the openness of what does not yet exist to the world. This ontological demand reveals the temporal asymmetry of vulnerability (IPCC 2022). Delayed impacts and cumulative damage expand the scope of ethical responsibility. Responsibility means considering the impacts of today's decisions on future beings. Children's environmental rights provide legal support for this claim. Phenomenologically, this is not a normative conclusion but a precondition of meaning. Caution is essential in the face of uncertainty. Responsibility in sustainability

is understood through fundamental approaches, including care, caution, accountability, and intergenerational connection. These approaches are grounded in a philosophical foundation. Responsibility is not only a legal obligation but also an ethical orientation. Both the immediate and delayed impacts of climate change expand the time horizon of our understanding of responsibility.

AXIOLOGY: THE GIVENESS OF VALUE AND PROPORTIONALITY

Value is not a numerical outcome; it is a search for meaning that emerges from the conditions of appearance. Value becomes visible in the openness of phenomena and shapes orientations. The process of 'disclosure' is a modern interpretation of the ancient 'aletheia'. It demonstrates how things unfold beyond instrumental definitions (Gallagher, Zahavi 2021: 57). Nature's multiple values cannot be confined to a single metric. Increasing climate risks transform the disclosure of value into an ethical call, making responsibility a mode that ensures the continuity of appearance (IPCC 2023). Ecophenomenology explains how value is experienced through the body and in the world. Narratives, in turn, link this value to responsibility for the future (Le Chevallier 2024). Value is an act of appearance that reveals meaning and organises orientations.

Instrumental reason, with its desire to control the world, narrows the normative horizon. It reduces sustainability to manageable variables and ignores meaning. Data-driven processes obscure externalities; the labour and ecological costs of artificial intelligence reveal these blind spots (Crawford 2021: 23). Sociotechnical future constructions confine plural values to singular goals. This creates the need to reestablish collective orientation. Philosophy of technology reveals the normative blindness of technical reason. Growth-oriented rationality tends to weaken in the face of ecological limits. Sustainability is grounded in modes of care that consider meaning, value and temporality rather than metrical conformity (Saito 2023: 88).

CONCLUSIONS

This study situates sustainability on a philosophical foundation that does not reduce it to the sum of instrumental indicators but instead explores the conditions under which the phenomenon appears. The phenomenological approach suspends naturalistic attitudes, making visible the constitutive role of givenness, intentionality and horizon in the formation of meaning. Thus, it demonstrates that measurable metrics can only gain legitimacy when they are articulated within this foundation of meaning. The findings revealed that the normative foundation of sustainability is nourished not only by outcome-oriented efficiency but also by the disclosure of values and the ethics of experience. Time consciousness and narrative structure have reconceptualised the act of sustaining within a continuity that connects past traces with future expectations. The ontological claim of future generations has expanded our horizon of responsibility to transcend present-day interests. This expansion has brought intergenerational justice, risk foresight, and sensitivity to irreversibility to the centre of decision-making processes. The perspective on nature has transcended the framework of viewing it solely as a resource, developing an ethical orientation that prioritises plural values, the common good, and ecological virtues. Practical reason has emerged as a guide for decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and limited information, guided by the principles of prudence, proportionality, and the reverse burden of proof. This framework necessitates end-means alignment in indicator design, context-sensitive thresholds, and multi-scale evaluation mechanisms. The study

has shown that transparency, accountability, and participatory reasoning in governance architectures, when combined with phenomenological justification, produce more lasting results.

Methodologically, interpreting quantitative indicators alongside qualitative horizons of meaning will reduce policy biases caused by misaligned technical rationality. In practice, institutions should internalise uncertainty management and feedback loops through a learning system approach. Furthermore, local knowledge, sensitivity, and stakeholder experiences will reveal areas of value that universal metrics silence. A limitation of this study is related to data access and the inability to model cross-scale externalities fully. Future research should examine the tensions between narrative time and institutional time, as well as the performance of virtue-based decision models, in an interdisciplinary manner. Consequently, sustainability is not merely a numerical goal; it is a dynamic alignment of horizons of meaning, value and responsibility. This alignment requires clearly defining the coherence of the hierarchy of objectives and the ethical accountability of indicators in strategy documents. Impact logic models should be reported with explicit assumptions and sources of uncertainty, and the exclusionary effects of measurements should be discussed in a normative context. A practical contribution for decision-makers is a three-step checklist: alignment of meaning, temporal adequacy, and relational impacts. Meaningful congruence confronts each indicator with the conditions under which the relevant phenomenon appears and reduces contextual bias. Temporal adequacy aligns the indicator's feedback periods with action horizons, aiming to limit path dependency.

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HASAN TUTAR

Tvarumo fenomenologija: nuo ontinių ženklų iki ontologinės prasmės paieškų

Santrauka

Šiame tyrime nagrinėjama, kad tvarumas turėtų būti suprantamas ne tik kaip matavimų ir tikslų visuma, bet ir kaip gilesnis filosofinis reiškinys. Laikinai sustabdant dabartiniame tvarumo diskurse dominuojančius instrumentinius ir techninius požiūrius, siekiama atskleisti pagrindines sąlygas, kuriomis grindžiama šios sąvokos reikšmė. Tyrime taikytas fenomenologinis metodas, leidžiantis analizuoti, kaip tvarumas patiriamas kaip „prasmės" ir „vertės" klausimas ir kaip jis susijęs su atsakomybės jausmu. Pagrindinis tyrimo argumentas – išmatuojami rodikliai (ontinis lygmuo) įgyja pagrįstumą tik tada, kai dera su gilesniu egzistenciniu pagrindu (ontologiniu lygmeniu), suteikiančiu jiems prasmę. Pasitelkiant laiko sąmonės ir naratyvų analizę, parodoma, kaip „palaikymo" veiksmas sukuria tęstinumą tarp praeities, dabarties ir ateities.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: tvarumo fenomenologija, ontinis-ontologinis skirtumas, laiko sąmonė, vertybių etika, rodiklių teisėtumas