

SELF-TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS DEGROWTH

A critical-realist reflection on the necessary
transformations in our inner being

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Abstract

Degrowth might be one solution to the ongoing climate and social crisis. In order to bring this theory into practice, deep and structural changes in our way of living are necessary. The present research uses 'the four planes of social being' model, developed by philosopher Roy Bhaskar, to look into the different levels on which human acts take place and the transformations that are therefore necessary on all these levels simultaneously in order to bring degrowth into practice. Within this paper most attention will be paid to the necessary changes on the level of 'inner being', since this level has received (too) little attention within degrowth literature so far. The changes that would need to happen on this level will be divided into three pathways which will each be elaborated upon. Finally, a case study on the way these different changes seem to have taken place in the inner being of people living in ecovillages will function as an illustration of what these changes could look like in practice.

Preface

The fact that humanity is destroying their own environment is difficult to grasp and deal with. The realisation that we find ourselves in the midst of an environmental crisis sometimes makes me feel powerless and frightened. At other times, the urgency of the situation activates and empowers me. Everything I hold dear is at stake. This dissertation is part of my personal struggle of dealing with the topic of climate change and biodiversity loss, and the overwhelming feelings that come with it. It is part of the struggle to find my own role within the movement that aims to counteract this enormous destruction by imagining and realising new ways of living together with our non-human companions.

By writing this dissertation I want to strengthen a theory that promotes a world in which humans and nature are no longer structurally exploited in the name of continuous economic growth. A world in which communal wellbeing is more important than the capital accumulation of a tiny group of billionaires. A world in which we feel connected to all other beings and are fully able to enjoy the complexity of our existence.

The current situation of crisis can be seen as an opportunity to rethink our position. We know the facts about the frighteningly rapid biodiversity loss, climate change, and other aspects of the ecological crisis, but apparently this is not enough to create large societal shifts. A deeper realisation about the cohesion of these disasters and our civilisation is necessary. Until we fundamentally change our social organisation and our relationship with nature, all actions we take against the ongoing crisis will be largely ineffective. We need to thoroughly change our culture, worldview, and values. This begins with changing ourselves.

This topic of a change in worldview as a remedy against the absurd, self-destructive situation we find ourselves in has engaged my interest for a long time. This dissertation discusses theories that have been with me for some time and have had profound effects on my way of thinking and acting: ideas such as rhizomatic thinking, voluntary simple living, gratitude, and being in a relationship of reciprocity with nature. Other theories, such as the call to start living more and more in a mode of being, only recently became known to me, but will probably stay with me for a long time.

When observing the process of changing my own perceptions, I notice how complex and difficult this process can be. Changing my way of being in the world remains a constant struggle, but it is a struggle I want to engage in. Now and in the future, I hope to inspire others to engage in this wonderful struggle of transforming one's own conceptions together with me. Maybe it is the struggle itself that really matters.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Routes towards ecological and human flourishing

This chapter starts with an introduction to the general theme and the specific focus of this research. The second section describes the general goal of this dissertation and poses the overall research question. After this, the methodology and central perspectives of this dissertation are explained.

1.1 General introduction

1.1.1 Crossing boundaries

In 2023, we find ourselves in an absurd situation. The system that promises us more food, more fun, more stuff, and more status (basically more of everything we seem to enjoy), and claims to be in our best interest, is actively destroying the one thing we and our children really need in order to continue a flourishing life: a safe and pleasant environment.¹

Ironically, the way in which we try to make our current lives as good and fulfilled as possible is the reason that human wellbeing will decrease in the near future.² It becomes clear that a theory is needed in which living good current lives can be combined with preserving our living environment for the future.³

Human civilisation is polluting and exploiting the planet, rapidly changing our global ecosystem; Mother Earth is warming up and a process of biodiversity loss is taking place at an unprecedented speed.⁴ The levels of climate change, biodiversity loss, and changes in several other fields have already crossed the limits that our earth can handle without fundamental, threatening changes in our living environment.⁵ As the latest report 'Climate Change 2023' of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the United Nations (hereafter: IPCC) states, climate change is caused by the activities of humans and forms a threat to the wellbeing of humans.⁶ Natural disasters such as heat waves, heavy storms, wildfires, and floods are becoming more and more frequent, causing thousands of deaths and depriving millions of their livelihoods. We have less and less fertile farming land available for food production due to severe drought and industrial agricultural methods that deeply damage the soil. Drinking

¹ Jason Hickel, *Minder is Meer: Hoe Degrowth de Wereld Zal Redden*, trans. Frederique Hijink (Berchem: Uitgeverij EPO vzw, 2021), 15-43.

² Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2011), 1-16.

³ Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, 1-16.

⁴ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 15-43.

⁵ Will Steffen et al., "Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet," *Science* 347, no. 6223 (February 2015): 736-47.

⁶ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report* (Geneva: IPCC, 2023), 4-24.

water is becoming increasingly scarce.⁷ These and other facts about our changing environment, which we face on a daily basis through all kinds of channels, are loud and clear. For several decades now, we have been spiralling deeper into a global crisis. Section 2.1.1. offers further explanation of this current and future ecological crisis.

Different strategies to measure the (negative) impact of human activity on the planet have been developed. Researcher Johan Rockström and his colleagues introduced the concept of *planetary boundaries*. These boundaries outline the 'safe operating space' for human activity. When any of these boundaries are crossed, the earth's system and thereby our living environment could fundamentally change. The nine boundaries identified are (1) climate change, (2) loss of biodiversity, (3) land-system change, (4) biochemical flows: phosphorous loading and nitrogen loading, (5) chemical pollution (later named novel entities), (6) freshwater use, (7) ocean acidification, (8) stratospheric ozone depletion, and (9) atmospheric aerosol loading.⁸ According to follow-up research, the boundaries on the first five items of this listing have already been overshoot. The sixth, seventh, and eighth boundaries do not appear to have been exceeded yet. For the ninth there is not yet enough data available.^{9 10} This means that we have left the safe operating space far behind us.

Another way of measuring the human exploitation of the earth is by measuring the *ecological footprint*. This is a measurement of the number of hectares of fertile land and water area that a population uses per capita to sustain its lifestyle. This tool can help to create an understanding of our impact on the earth. Each person could have a footprint of up to 1.8 hectares if the hectares available, when preserving nature's restorative capacity, were distributed equally.¹¹ In reality, the size of the footprint is very unequally divided between regions. For example, the average person from Belgium has a footprint of 6.6 hectares, while the average person from India has one of only 1.2 hectares.¹² The average footprint is 2.7 hectares, which means that we are using an amount of natural resources that could only be provided by one-and-a-half earths in the long term. The inhabitants of the industrialized nations and oil states that have the highest footprints are most responsible for this over-extraction that is causing the destruction of our ecosystem.¹³

⁷ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 15-43.

⁸ Johan Rockström et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Nature* 461 (September 2009): 472-75.

⁹ Steffen, "Planetary boundaries," 736-47.

¹⁰ Lin Persson et al., "Outside the Safe Operating Space of the Planetary Boundary for Novel Entities," *Environmental Science & Technology* 56, no.3 (2022): 1510-1521. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.1c04158>.

¹¹ Thomas Block and Erik Paredis, "Het Politieke Karakter van Duurzaamheidsvraagstukken," in *Armoede en Sociale Uitsluiting: Jaarboek 2019*, eds. Jill Coene et al. (Leuven/Den Haag: Acco, 2019), 51.

¹² "Ecological Footprint by Country 2023," *World Population Review*, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/ecological-footprint-by-country>.

¹³ Block and Paredis, "Duurzaamheidsvraagstukken," 51.

We are in the middle of an ecological collapse that is being caused by irresponsible behaviours of modern human civilisation.¹⁴ Our current era is now often referred to as the *Anthropocene*: the period in which the humans, the *antropoi* in Greek, are the most influential cause of changes in the global environment.¹⁵ Ironically, these environmental changes are now threatening the conditions for the survival of the group that caused them: human beings.¹⁶ The planet itself will survive, but humanity is in deep trouble.¹⁷

On top of this, the burdens of this situation are very unfairly distributed between different groups of human beings. The groups that are suffering most from the effects of the climate crisis are usually those that have contributed least to creating this crisis.¹⁸ These are usually already vulnerable groups such as people living in poverty, immigrants, indigenous people, women, children, and elderly. The effects of ongoing climate change reinforce existing social inequalities by hitting these people, who find themselves in difficult socio-economic positions, the hardest.¹⁹

There is at present huge inequality. The poorest half of the world's population owns only 1 per cent of total global wealth.²⁰ Hundreds of millions struggle to meet their basic needs.²¹ Meanwhile, the richest people, who are profiting most from the current capitalist system, are most responsible for the persistence of the ecological crisis. The richest 10% of the global population own as much as 85% of the global wealth and cause more than half of all CO₂-emissions.²² ²³ This situation is getting worse, since inequality has been increasing globally in recent years.²⁴

This situation is criticised by the *climate justice* movement: a movement that highlights the *injustice* of the fact that certain social or racial groups suffer more from the effects of environmental disasters and other consequences of the ecological crisis than others, and that

¹⁴ European Environment Agency, "Growth without Economic Growth," last modified April 20, 2023, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/growth-without-economic-growth>.

¹⁵ Henk Manschot, *Blijf de Aarde Trouw: Pleidooi voor een Nietzscheaanse Terrasofie* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2016), 164-68.

¹⁶ Manschot, 169-71.

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, *Het Parlement van de Dingen: Over Gaia en de Representatie van Niet-Mensen*, trans. Willem Visser (Amsterdam: Boom Uitgevers, 2020), 60.

¹⁸ Maïka De Keyzer and Tim Soens, "Dragen de Zwakste Schouders steeds de Zwaartse Lasten? Klimaatrechtvaardigheid Vandaag en in het Verleden," in *Klimaat en Sociale Rechtvaardigheid*, ed. Sacha Dierckx (Oud-Turnhout: Gompel & Svacina, 2019), 37-41.

¹⁹ Anneleen Kenis and Matthias Lievens, *De Mythe van de Groene Economie: Valstrik, Verzet, Alternatieven* (Berchem: Uitgeverij EPO, 2012), 33-35.

²⁰ Block and Paredis, "Duurzaamheidsvraagstukken," 50.

²¹ Martin-Brehm Christensen, Christian Hallum, Alex Maitland, Quentin Parrinello, and Chiara Putaturo, *Survival of the Richest: How We Must Tax the Super-Rich Now to Fight Inequality* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2023), 2.

²² Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 162-66.

²³ Block and Paredis, "Duurzaamheidsvraagstukken," 50-51.

²⁴ Kenis and Lievens, *De Mythe*, 270.

these are usually the groups that have contributed little or nothing to the existence of this crisis.²⁵

A further explanation of the social crisis that is formed by increasing social inequality and climate injustice can be found in section 2.1.2.

In her influential idea of the *donut economy*, Kate Raworth argues that a well-functioning society takes place within a donut shape, where the inner boundary is formed by the fulfilment of everyone's basic requirements: food, water, health, income, jobs, energy, social equity, gender equality, education, resilience, and voice. In this donut shape the outer boundary is formed by staying within the planetary boundaries.²⁶ The space between these two boundaries is what she calls the 'safe and just space for humanity'.²⁷ This theory takes into account both the ecological and the social crises that we face. According to many system-critical scholars such as Hickel, Kenis, and Lievens, the existence of both these crises is closely linked because they are both the result of the current capitalist system that puts both nature and people at the service of capital accumulation and economic growth.^{28 29} Creating a society that meets Raworth's criterion therefore seems to require a major transformation of that system.³⁰

1.1.2. Beyond the growth imperative

Overwhelming as all of this might be, we cannot let this information paralyze us. Instead we need to get up and face what is maybe the most difficult question of our time: *Why are we stuck here and how do we get out?*

We seem to be stuck here because we are unable to thoroughly change our societal organisation that is causing the ongoing destruction of our environment. The European Environmental Agency states that the current way in which humanity is organised is 'profoundly unsustainable'.³¹ Much of our economic and social organisation is built around pursuing unlimited economic growth.³² Ongoing growth, however, seems not possible in a world in which resources are limited because it is normally accompanied by an increase in energy and material use.³³

²⁵ De Keyzer and Soens, "Klimaatrechtvaardigheid," 37-43.

²⁶ Block and Paredis, "Duurzaamheidsvraagstukken," 52-53.

²⁷ Block and Paredis, 53.

²⁸ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 45-78.

²⁹ Kenis and Lievens, *De Mythe*, 263-270.

³⁰ Block and Paredis, 54.

³¹ European Environment Agency, "Growth without Economic Growth."

³² Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Returning the Gift," *Minding Nature* 7, no. 2 (2022): 23.

³³ Jonas Van der Slycken, "'To Degrow or (not) to Degrow?' Ontgroeien om Binnen Planetaire Grenzen Rechtvaardig te Bloeien," in Dierckx, *Klimaat en Sociale Rechtvaardigheid*, 135-40.

According to economic anthropologist Jason Hickel, the current ecological crisis is almost entirely driven by excessive economic growth in industrialised countries. In particular, the massive accumulation of capital and resources by a small group of ultra-rich is a major factor in the perpetuation of this crisis that threatens the livelihoods of many people in the global South and people in vulnerable socio-economic positions everywhere.³⁴ Luckily, our economic and social systems are not definite: we can shape them ourselves.³⁵

Proponent of so-called 'Green Growth' argue that technological progress will make it possible to make economic growth ecologically sustainable by decoupling it from increasing material use.³⁶ There is, however, no scientific evidence that this decoupling can happen (now or in the future) to an extent that slows down or even ends the overexploitation of our planet.³⁷ Moving beyond the pursuit of continuous economic growth can, therefore, be seen as the only way forward for regions that need to decrease their ecological footprint. This is further explained in section 2.2.2.

Decreasing the use of materials and energy in countries that exceed their fair share of resources while increasing (or at least maintaining) the current level of wellbeing, is central within a movement called *degrowth*. Hickel describes degrowth as 'the planned downscaling of energy and resource use to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just, and equitable way'.³⁸ Degrowth offers an alternative for the current 'growth-as-usual paradigm'.³⁹ The movement advocates for a society in which the growth imperative is left behind and clears the way for ecological and social wellbeing as main objectives of our social organisation.⁴⁰

Belgian scholar Jonas Van der Slycken states that the level of a person's wellbeing can be seen as dependent on the fulfilment of nine universal human needs: livelihood, protection, affection, understanding, participation, free time, creation, identity, and freedom.⁴¹ These needs are fulfilled differently within each culture. Our current capitalist culture attempts to fulfil these needs to a large extent with material consumption. This, however, fails to deliver what is really needed. The seven needs beyond livelihood and protection are better met in ways that require no or far less consumption.⁴² Degrowth is exploring ways in which a high level of wellbeing can be combined with a low ecological footprint.

³⁴ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 29-31.

³⁵ Mink and Brand, *Post-Anthropocentric Economies*, 16-23.

³⁶ Timotheé Parrique, "From Green Growth to Degrowth," *Global Policy* (April 2021), 3.

³⁷ European Environment Agency, "Growth without Economic Growth."

³⁸ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 37.

³⁹ Parrique, "Green Growth to Degrowth," 1.

⁴⁰ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien 135-37.

⁴¹ Van der Slycken, 141.

⁴² Van der Slycken, 140-42.

One of the core objectives of degrowth is to realise a fair distribution of resources and wealth between present and future generations and between the global North and the global South. It aims to decrease the overall use of energy and materials in order to reduce the negative effect of human civilisation on our planet. The ecological footprint of industrialized, high-income countries needs to be lowered in order to leave resources for other countries and generations without exhausting the earth.⁴³ The general outlines of degrowth theory are further explained in the second chapter of this dissertation. A complete, successful implementation of degrowth would be a situation in which humanity stays within the planetary boundaries and all of the world's inhabitants have the opportunity to flourish. In the context of degrowth, flourishing means healthy and safe living at an adequate level of wellbeing.⁴⁴

A large and diverse body of concrete proposals that implement these ideals have been drafted within the degrowth literature.⁴⁵ Hickel proposes several concrete societal changes: no longer producing products with planned obsolescence, limiting advertising, sharing objects we only need occasionally, reducing food waste, and downscaling all industries that harm the environment.⁴⁶ Other frequently mentioned proposals include: redistributing wealth by introducing a minimum and a maximum income, limiting working hours, implementing direct democracy, and creating a sufficiency-culture.⁴⁷ In this dissertation, *degrowth objectives* refers to the general objective of realising human wellbeing within the ecological limits, and the practical proposals to match this objective.

Bringing all of these proposals into practice would entail large changes in our societal organisation. These changes can only happen if members of society accept them internally and start acting towards bringing them into practice.⁴⁸ Currently, however, our way of thinking seems to be stuck in internalised patterns. Hickel writes that the idea that we need economic growth in order to live better is very deeply embedded in our current Western society.⁴⁹ Most people in Western and affluent countries have incorporated the growth ideal: it has occupied our imagination, language, and social relations, making it nearly impossible to imagine a future without growth.⁵⁰

⁴³ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 135-37.

⁴⁴ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 151-71

⁴⁵ Nick Fitzpatrick, Timothée Parrique, and Inês Cosme, "Exploring Degrowth Policy Proposals: A Systematic Mapping with Thematic Synthesis," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 356 (September 2022): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.132764>.

⁴⁶ Hickel, 180-90.

⁴⁷ Fitzpatrick, Parrique, and Cosme, "Exploring Degrowth Policy Proposals," 10.

⁴⁸ Hubert Buch-Hansen and Iana Nesterova, "Less and More: Conceptualising Degrowth Transformations," *Ecological Economics* 205 (March 2023): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2022.107731>.

⁴⁹ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 151-62.

⁵⁰ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 141.

Scientist and philosopher Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that to stop the ongoing destruction of our environment, we need to change ourselves. A worldview in which our planet and all its non-human inhabitants and properties are merely seen as exploitable resources seems to have captured us. We need to change our perception, priorities, and values in order to free ourselves from this worldview and return to living in a sustainable, non-destructive way.⁵¹

This is in line with the argument of scholar David Orr, who states that the human-caused ecological crisis can be seen as reflecting ‘a priori disorder in the thought, perception, imagination, intellectual priorities, and loyalties inherent in the industrial mind’.⁵² The emergence and continuation of the ecological crisis are closely connected to the way in which we think about the world and our position in it, and to the institutions that shape our thinking.⁵³

In order to get ourselves out of the current situation and guarantee a safe and pleasant living environment for current and future generations, we need to find ways to overcome this defective thinking and motivate ourselves to act towards realising much-needed and profound changes in the societal organisation. Actualizing degrowth would presuppose a change of our foundational beliefs that maintain the current system. A process of transforming one’s worldview, values and goals to bring them in line with the degrowth ideals, needs to take place. This dissertation aims to strengthen degrowth theory by exploring the different types of transformation that need to happen within ourselves in order to enable us to bring degrowth into practice.

Actively transforming our way of thinking could be an important step in successfully getting out of the difficult situation we find ourselves in. The inquiry into this matter is primarily philosophical, since it concerns itself with transformations that need to happen in the way in which individuals view the world around them and their position in it.

1.1.3 Transforming our inner being

Roy Bhaskar, a philosopher of science, developed a conceptual framework to strengthen the ability of the social sciences to enable the emancipation of persons.⁵⁴ As part of this project, he developed the *four-planar social being model* (hereafter: social being model), which elaborates the idea that all human action and being simultaneously takes place on four different, but interdependent dimensions or planes at the same time: material transactions

⁵¹ Kimmerer, “Returning the Gift,” 22-23.

⁵² David W. Orr, “Educating for the Environment: Higher Education’s Challenge of the Next Century,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 27, no. 3 (May/June 1995): 44, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1995.10544663>.

⁵³ David W. Orr, 44.

⁵⁴ Mervyn Hartwig, “From the Anatomy of the Global Crisis to the Ontology of Human Flourishing,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 14, no. 3 (June 2015): 227, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1476743015Z.00000000069>.

with nature, social interactions between people, social structure and a person's inner being.⁵⁵ By 'material transactions with nature' is meant the way in which we are in constant interaction with our natural surroundings and all non-human beings, is meant. 'Social interactions between people' refers to all verbal and non-verbal interaction taking place between persons. The plane of 'social structure' emphasizes the pre-existing structures of society along which interaction with others takes place.^{56 57} Lastly, 'a person's inner being' points at the internal views and values that shape a person's actions on the other planes.⁵⁸ Bhaskar's general theory of critical realism forms the foundations for the social being model. It is therefore important to further elaborate on this theory in order to gain comprehensive understanding of the model.

Scholars Hubert Buch-Hansen and Iana Nesterova introduce this social being model as a framework to make the different types of transformations that need to happen in order to successfully bring degrowth into practice insightful. They do this by illustrating what transformation would be needed on each of the four dimensions to create a degrowth society.⁵⁹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova summarize the necessary transformations in a table that lists conceptions and conducts that we need less of on each plane on the one side, and conceptions and conducts that we need more of on the other side.⁶⁰ This table is added to this dissertation in section 3.2.

Based on their literature study, Buch-Hansen and Nesterova point out that relatively little attention has been paid to the changes that are necessary on the plane of people's *inner being*, within the degrowth discourse.⁶¹ This plane includes who we are and our self-perception; it includes our values, goals and worldviews.⁶² The detected *inner being research gap* within the degrowth movement can be seen as problematic because changes on this plane could be of major importance for bringing degrowth theory into practice. This dissertation, therefore, focusses on deepening the changes necessary on the fourth plane to actualize degrowth. The role of the first three planes within the degrowth project, as put forward by Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, is briefly discussed in section 3.2 but will not be further investigated as part of this dissertation.

According to Bhaskar, it is the plane of inner being that determines the way people act.⁶³ Nesterova, following Bhaskar, notes that '[t]o become reality, degrowth needs to be in the

⁵⁵ Roy Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 53.

⁵⁶ Hubert Buch-Hansen and Iana Nesterova, "Towards a Science of Deep Transformations: Initiating a Dialogue between Degrowth and Critical Realism," *Ecological Economics* 190 (December 2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107188>.

⁵⁷ Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 53-55.

⁵⁸ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1-3.

⁵⁹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 1-8.

⁶⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 3.

⁶¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 7.

⁶² Hartwig, "Ontology of Human Flourishing," 228.

⁶³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

human psyche first and foremost'.⁶⁴ The view that psychological changes in attitude drive behavioural change is also influential within the domain of public health. The extent to which changes in attitude alone can bring about permanent behavioural change remains disputed, but changes in attitude can in any case form an important starting point for changing behaviour.⁶⁵

Bhaskar's view is not entirely self-evident since other factors, such as the social context, could also be appointed as main drivers of human actions. Within the social being model, actions always take place on all four planes simultaneously, each has a part in facilitating and influencing acts.⁶⁶ Which plane is appointed as the origin of human action, depends on which point you see as the starting point in this circle of mutual influence. Either way, transformations on the plane of inner being have some influence on actions and can therefore be seen as essential for actualizing degrowth.⁶⁷ This dissertation does not go further into the discussion on the extent to which each plane can contribute to changing actions and thereby materialize degrowth. Instead it follows Bhaskar's view and focusses on deepening and enforce the inner being plane in order to strengthen degrowth theory as a whole.

The notion that successful implementation of degrowth can only take place if it is embraced by the members of the community on an internal level, on the level of inner being, is the starting point for deeper inquiry into this level of inner being.⁶⁸ The necessary transformations on this plane, are transformations taking place in oneself by oneself: processes of *self-transformation*. Importantly, the incentive for these processes would nevertheless have to come from the surroundings of a person. This could either happen top-down from the existing institutions or bottom-up by newly emerging grass-root initiatives.⁶⁹ These both options are further discussed in section 5.4.

1.2 Goal of this dissertation

The main goal of this dissertation is to contribute to filling in the assumed *inner being research gap*. This is done by proposing pathways along which self-transformation could take place, in order to enable persons to bring degrowth's objectives into practice. It will be argued that following all proposed paths of self-transformation will enable individuals to act towards realising a degrowth society. Moreover, this proposal of different paths aims to form a starting point for further research into the necessary transformations in our inner being. By doing this,

⁶⁴ Iana Nesterova, "Addressing the Obscurity of Change in Values in Degrowth Business," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 315 (September 2021): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.128152>.

⁶⁵ Verplanken & Orbell, 327-333

⁶⁶ Roy Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 53-55.

⁶⁷ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 2.

⁶⁸ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 7.

⁶⁹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 4.

this dissertation seeks to contribute to the wider goal of bringing degrowth into practice and ultimately establishing a degrowth society.

The underlying idea is that the members of a capitalist, growth-based society would need to transform their values and goals to become able to act in accordance with degrowth and its objectives. This self-transformation is an essential component of the process of changing our current growth-based society into the envisioned degrowth society.

The inner being plane of Bhaskar's four-planar model of social being forms the 'stage' on which these transformations need to take place. Using this model as a framework has the advantage of clearly outlining at which level of a person's experience and action the proposed transformations should take place. At the same time, it ensures that the interplay of this dimension of human acting with the other dimensions never falls out of sight. The list of several conceptions we need less and more of proposed by Buch-Hansen and Nesterova serves as a starting point for deriving different pathways of transformation.

In short, this dissertation looks into the different types of transformation that need to take place within ourselves in order to make us able to actualize degrowth. This dissertation is therefore built around the question: *Which types of transformations in our inner being are necessary in order to bring degrowth into practice?*

Furthermore, to give a comprehensive answer to the main question, this dissertation furthermore explores how the insights on self-transformation, gained from the comprehensive literature study, can be translated into concrete practices. This is done by a case study into the role of the proposed paths of transformations in ecovillages. Ecovillages can be seen as examples of degrowth in practice.⁷⁰ It is therefore valuable to assess whether and how the proposed pathways of transformation have taken place in these types of communities.

Subsequently, the general insights of the literature study and the ecovillages case form the basis for drafting a short recommendation for urban renewal in the Bloemekenswijk neighbourhood in Ghent. This forms an additional elaboration on self-transformation towards degrowth in practice. It is part of a project on 'renewal of city renewal' of the *Stadsacademie* (In English: 'City Academy') in Ghent. The project is further explained in section 6.2.

⁷⁰ Claudio Cattaneo, "Eco-communities," In D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, 165-68.

1.3 Methodology and central perspectives

This dissertation investigates the topic of the necessary self-transformation for actualizing degrowth primarily on a conceptual level. A limited reflection on the practical implementation of the proposed self-transformation is also done.

The second, third, and fourth chapter consist of a literature-study on the fields of degrowth, critical realism, and specific aspects of these theories. The fifth chapter, adds literature study on several related theories connected to transformations in values and worldview. In the sixth chapter, a case study on the role of the three proposed pathways within the ecovillage movement and a modest recommendation for bringing the transformations into action in the Bloemekenswijk are done to add some practice-based insights to the inquiry. Combined insights from the literature study and the two cases will form the answer to the research question.

The theoretical basis of degrowth is formed by two standard works: 'Less is more; How degrowth will save the world' by Jason Hickel and 'Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era' written by a large, diverse group of degrowth scholars and edited by Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis. These sources are complemented by various other sources discussing degrowth and its objectives.

Several works on critical realism by Roy Bhaskar and some works by scholars that place themselves within the tradition of critical realism function as the theoretical basis for this philosophy of science perspective. This dissertation is embedded in that perspective. Therefore, it builds on the ontology and epistemology that form the basis of critical realism. Critical realist ontology holds, in short, that our natural and social reality contain a deep level of unobservable structures that influence observable structures. Its epistemology builds further on this in containing that it is not possible to derive knowledge that entirely grasps reality.⁷¹ Critical realism in general and the ontology and epistemology that form the basis of it, are further explained in chapter 3.

The dissertation is primarily a philosophical inquiry, but perspectives from the fields of economy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science play an important role. The field of degrowth is inherently interdisciplinary, since it proposes solutions that have implications for many aspects of human life. Degrowth theory invites us to think creatively when imagining how a growth-free society could be shaped.⁷² Degrowth entails an economic and societal transformation that, according to Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, can only come

⁷¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 6.

⁷² Serge Latouche, "Decolonization of Imaginary," In D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, 117-20.

into place by a change in our way of being. This change, among other things, requires psychological change at the level of the individual.^{73 74}

It is important to keep in mind that the two main guiding theories for this dissertation, degrowth and critical realism are large and diverse research fields within which discussions and disagreements take place. Degrowth in particular involves a very diverse group of researchers that differ in their exact ideas of what a degrowth society should look like and how it can be presented.⁷⁵ This dissertation tries to give an overview of the current state of the degrowth debate.

1.4 Structure of this dissertation

In order to structure the transformations in the inner being that are necessary for actualizing degrowth, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the definitions of both 'inner being' and 'degrowth.' Inner being is defined as the 'the plane of inner being' within Roy Bhaskar's 'the four-planar social being model'. Degrowth is explained by summarizing the current state of the degrowth debate.

Therefore, **the second chapter** of this research gives a short overview of the general conceptions of degrowth theory. The goal of this chapter is to sketch the outlines of the current state of the degrowth debate and formulate the general objectives of the degrowth movement. At the end of the chapter, the need for an overarching framework to bring the theory of degrowth into practice is explained. As a next step of the argument, **the third chapter** presents Roy Bhaskar's the 'four planes of social being' model as a framework that could be used. Scholars Buch-Hansen and Nesterova already present a way in which this model can function as a framework to structure the transformations, that are necessary for a shift towards a degrowth society.⁷⁶ The model is be further explained in the broader context of Bhaskar's theory of critical realism. Insights from his entire body of work play a central role in the further research. The chapter ends by briefly outlining the way in which the first three of Bhaskar's planes would need to be filled in, in order to successfully implement degrowth.

In **the fourth chapter**, the exact meaning of the inner being and the function of self-transformations of this inner within critical realism is discussed. Subsequently, as a first step to fill in Bhaskar's fourth plane and answer the research question, different pathways of transformations that are necessary on this plane, in order to successfully bring degrowth into practice, are developed. **The fifth chapter** forms the core of this dissertation. It attempts to elaborate each of the proposed pathways by linking related theories on necessary changes of

⁷³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1-3.

⁷⁴ Nesterova, "Change in Values," 4-8.

⁷⁵ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 2.

⁷⁶ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1-8.

worldviews to each of the paths. Thereafter, ways to bring these developed transformation paths into practice are explored.

A case study on the way in which the proposed pathways play a role in the practice of ecovillages is done in **the sixth chapter**. This is followed by, a recommendation for city renewal in the Bloemekenswijk that is done as part of the master's thesis atelier. This recommendation is based on the combined insights of earlier chapters of this research.

The seventh chapter discusses insights and remarks on the basis of the previous chapters. Finally, the conclusion in **the eight chapter** answers the research question and summarizes the findings from the literature study and the case study.

Chapter 2: Imagining a society without growth

Currently, degrowth is often proposed as a solution to both the environmental and the social crisis within the public and academic debate. This social movement and interdisciplinary theory challenges the idea that economic growth is necessary for a society to flourish. The movement advocates for the reduction of our production and consumption in order to create a society that is socially just and ecologically sustainable.⁷⁷

The chapter starts by giving a short description of the climate and social crisis that we are currently facing. The theory of degrowth is then proposed as a possible answer to these deep and urgent crises. Lastly, the need for a conceptual framework in order to successfully bring degrowth into practice is explained.

2.1 The problem: the environmental and social crisis

2.1.1 The ecological crisis

Temperatures, sea levels, and numbers of natural disasters are rising. One million species face extinction. If we continue with our business as usual, we will face around 4 degrees of global warming (compared to pre-industrial levels) by the end of this century.⁷⁸ The effects of this will alter every level of existence and will have a huge impact on the state of humanity. Fertile land will turn into desert, food and drinking water will become scarce, and the number of climate refugees will continue to rise. The international political situation will become increasingly unstable, more conflicts will arise, and for a large amount of people it will become more and more difficult to fulfil their basic needs.⁷⁹ The ongoing ecological crisis is multi-faceted and its exact effects are difficult to predict. But the previous listing gives a preview of what could come pretty close to hell on earth. Given the immense effects that this ecological break-down will have on our lives, it is absurd that we did not start to act sooner and that we are still barely acting now.⁸⁰

Currently we find ourselves in a situation of 1,1 degree of global warming.⁸¹ Five of the planetary boundaries are already crossed.⁸² By now, human civilisation has caused huge biodiversity loss, pollution of water, air, and soil, and changes in the climate that have large

⁷⁷ Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, introduction to *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 1-18.

⁷⁸ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 15-43.

⁷⁹ Hickel, 15-43.

⁸⁰ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 7-41.

⁸¹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2023*, 4.

⁸² Jason Hickel, "Is it Possible to Achieve a Good Life for All within Planetary Boundaries?," *Third World Quarterly* (2018): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1535895>.

and partly unpredictable consequences.⁸³ According to the IPCC, excessive greenhouse gas emissions are the main cause of climate change. As reasons for these excess emissions, the report points to the use of energy and land in unsustainable ways, and to the fact that certain groups of people have unsustainable lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production. Time is running out to take the necessary measures for a liveable future.⁸⁴ We need to find ways to reduce our impact on our environment and live in a way that no longer adds to the loss of biodiversity, global warming, and the further crossing of the other planetary boundaries.

As indicated in the introduction, this research starts from the notion that the ongoing ecological collapse is the direct result of the way in which our current society is organised. Replacing the current social organisation, that has economic growth as its main objective, might be the only change we have at securing a liveable future.

2.1.2 The social crisis

The crudest part of the outlined situation is that the largest part of the human population does not even benefit from the system that is actively destroying the planet. In one year, a single CEO of one of the top-100 British companies (in terms of market value), earns as much income as 10.000 workers in garment factories in Bangladesh combined.⁸⁵ This example illustrates that on top of the enormous inequality in wealth, that was briefly discussed in the introduction, there is also a huge inequality in income. Hickel points out that the 60% least-earning people together earn only 5% of the total income earned worldwide.⁸⁶ In most parts of the world, this income inequality and thereby the overall inequality in wealth is increasing.⁸⁷ Most 'new' income that is generated by the growth of the global economy is added to the enormous wealth of the richest persons: the wealthiest 5% gained as much as 46% of the new income that was generated by the growth of the global economy in the last forty years.⁸⁸ This economic inequality adds to the continuation of the ecological crisis because it encourages people to purchase status-increasing items that do not fulfil their actual needs.⁸⁹ Moreover, the ultra-rich consume huge amounts of unnecessary luxury goods and often derive their wealth from extremely polluting industries. On average, a member of the wealthiest one percent of the global population causes one hundred times more emission than a member of the poorest fifty percent. Meaning that the wealthiest persons are the ones most responsible for the ecological crisis.⁹⁰

⁸³ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 15-43.

⁸⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2023*, 25.

⁸⁵ Deborah Hardoon, *An Economy for the 99%: It's Time to Build a Human Economy that Benefits Everyone, Not Just the Privileged Few* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2017), 2.

⁸⁶ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 166-72.

⁸⁷ Block and Paredis, "Duurzaamheidsvraagstukken," 50.

⁸⁸ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 166-72.

⁸⁹ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 140-42.

⁹⁰ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 162-66.

As mentioned in the introduction, members of vulnerable groups whose livelihoods are most threatened by changing climate conditions are usually those who have contributed the least to the causes of these changing conditions. This process in which vulnerable groups bear the brunt of the behaviour of the well-off, is visible both between countries and within countries.⁹¹ If no actions are taken to counter this climate injustice, the effects of climate change will reinforce the existing social inequalities by exacerbating the position of the already socio-economically disadvantaged.⁹²

According to an Oxfam report that came out in January 2023, economic inequality has reached a dangerous level. It threatens our societies by preventing us from ending poverty, negatively influencing politics, and endangering our future on a habitable planet.⁹³ Countries with more equality tend to have less violence, longer life expectancy, and better mental health among their citizens.⁹⁴ It is therefore extremely important to take measures to ensure that existing inequality decreases rather than increases.

2.2 A response: degrowth

Both the ecological and the social crisis can be seen as the direct result of the current system. Under the name degrowth an alternative is proposed in which the wellbeing of all humans and ecological sustainability become the main objectives of our society.⁹⁵ This section starts by outlining the basic idea behind degrowth. In the next step of the argument, it presents degrowth as our only option to move towards a just and environmentally sustainable society.

2.2.1 The outlines of degrowth

Degrowth is a social movement that is formed by the collective effort of activist groups, researchers, grass-root initiatives and policy makers. Degrowth was developed from a critique on capitalist economic growth and development as social objectives.⁹⁶ Its advocates want to create an economy without growth. More concretely this means a society with an energy and material through put that is becoming smaller instead of bigger, in order to create a society that does no longer causes environmental degradation.⁹⁷ The critique against development, is a critique against ‘development for the sake of development’, progress without any set goal.⁹⁸ The core idea of the degrowth movement is often summarized as ‘an equitable

⁹¹ Kenis and Lievens, *De Mythe*, 33-35.

⁹² Kenis and Lievens, 33-35.

⁹³ Christensen, Hallum, Maitland, Parrinello, and Putaturo, *Survival of the Richest*, 15.

⁹⁴ Van der Slycken, “Ontgroeien,” 142-45.

⁹⁵ Van der Slycken, “Ontgroeien,” 135-36.

⁹⁶ Kallis, “In Defence of Degrowth,” 874.

⁹⁷ Van der Slycken, “Ontgroeien,” 136-37.

⁹⁸ D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, introduction to “*Degrowth*,” 5.

downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term'.⁹⁹ As becomes clear from this definition, the theory of degrowth is not only concerned with creating a way of living that is possible within the planetary boundaries, it also has a strong social component, which focusses on the wellbeing of persons.¹⁰⁰ The movement advocates for making wellbeing, social justice and ecological sustainability the main objectives of our society. In order to do this, a deep transformation in the dominant economic and social discourse is necessary.¹⁰¹ Degrowth offers a different direction of organising our economy, political system, culture, and lifestyle.

Within degrowth literature, there is discussion about how far-reaching the changes that result in this different organisation need to be. Scholar Ted Trainer states that, to no longer use more than our fair share of available resources, people living in rich (often Western) countries need to reduce their material consumption by around 90%. Therefore, he advocates that the degrowth movement should focus much more on proposing radically simpler lifestyles and on almost completely phasing out current resource-intensive industries, such as leisure shopping, construction, and private transportation.¹⁰² This can be seen as a critique on many other degrowth scholar whose proposals are not as far-reaching.

2.2.2 The only way forward

The current societal organisation is deeply unsustainable. Political leaders, scientists and diverse organisations are working together to draft plans and policies for creating a society that is no longer causing excessive pollution, biodiversity loss, and global warming.¹⁰³ The public debate on creating a sustainable society is dominated by the proponents of Green Growth. This theory is based on the idea that technological progress which increases efficiency, will make continuous economic growth possible at a lower cost for the environment.¹⁰⁴ In this scenario, material use goes down while the economy continues to grow.

There is, however, a large body of evidence refuting the claim that economic growth without an increase in material use is possible.¹⁰⁵ Despite all the efforts to decouple economic growth from an increase in resource use and environmental degradation, actual decoupling on a

⁹⁹ Jin Xue, "Urban Planning and Degrowth: A Missing Dialogue," *Local Environment* 27, no. 4 (January 2021): 404, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2020.1867840>.

¹⁰⁰ Xue, 404.

¹⁰¹ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 135-36.

¹⁰² Ted Trainer, "De-Growth: Some Suggestions from the Simpler Way Perspective," *Ecological Economics* 167 (January 2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106436>.

¹⁰³ European Environment Agency, "Growth without Economic Growth."

¹⁰⁴ Parrique, "Green Growth to Degrowth," 1-4.

¹⁰⁵ Trainer, "De-Growth: Some Suggestions," 2.

global scale is not happening at the moment and is very unlikely to happen in the future.¹⁰⁶ The current capitalist, growth-based system seems to be unable to offer solutions to both the climate and the social crisis that we are facing.¹⁰⁷ A fundamental change in the way that our society and economic system are organised is necessary.¹⁰⁸

Something holding us back from starting this reorganisation, is the idea that we need economic growth in order to live better. This idea appears to be very deeply embedded in our current society.¹⁰⁹ However, when looking more closely into the relationship between wellbeing and the economic situation in different countries, it becomes clear that it is not actually the growth itself that creates better lives for the members of the society.¹¹⁰ There is a turning point in economic growth after which more growth does no longer add to more social wellbeing. After this point, which was reached in the 1970s in most developed countries, the way in which income is distributed and the extent to which is it invested in public services, such as education and health care, decides whether overall wellbeing is increasing or shrinking.^{111 112} When taking into account the nine universal human needs that were mentioned in the introduction as an indication for human wellbeing, it becomes clear that our wellbeing only partly depends on our material wealth. Degrowth scholarship uses these insights in its research into different ways to increase wellbeing while reducing resource use and the ecological footprint.

As Trainer argues, it is not possible to extend the lifestyle we have now in affluent countries to the entire global population without pushing the limits of our planet even further. We live in an unsustainable way that exhausts the earth.¹¹³ Extending the Western, highly materialistic lifestyle cannot be seen as a feasible way to increase global wellbeing. Human civilisation must reorganise itself in a way that puts less pressure on the earth while increasing global wellbeing. Degrowth could lead the way for this reorganisation.

Several degrowth scholars note that living in a society without growth will soon be unavoidable. According to them, the choice we have is either to make the necessary adjustments now deliberately and in a well-considered way or to wait until they come into place in unexpected and chaotic way due to the societal and economic collapse.^{114 115}

¹⁰⁶ European Environment Agency, "Growth without Economic Growth."

¹⁰⁷ Mink and Brand, *Post-Anthropocentric Economies*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ European Environment Agency, "Growth without Economic Growth."

¹⁰⁹ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 151-62.

¹¹⁰ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 151-62.

¹¹¹ D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, introduction to "*Degrowth*," 6.

¹¹² Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 151-62.

¹¹³ Trainer, "De-Growth: Some Suggestions," 2.

¹¹⁴ Trainer, "De-Growth: Some Suggestions," 4-5.

¹¹⁵ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 139-40.

2.3. The need for an overarching framework

One of the weaknesses of degrowth theory is the fact that there is no clear programme on the way in which it should be brought into practice.¹¹⁶ It becomes clear from the previous section that many concrete measures are suggested, but a larger vision of how we get people to actually implement them remains absent.

When looking into the theory and its implications, it becomes obvious that degrowth is not only about using less resources and energy, but that it involves deep structural changes within our way of living and our way of being in the world. These changes would have to take place in all different realms of our life.¹¹⁷ The way we interact with non-human entities (that are part of nature) would need to change in order to depart from the capitalist view that nature is something independent from us, something that we can exploit endlessly to serve our purposes.¹¹⁸ The way we interact with other humans, both on a more personal as on a more structural level would have to change, in order to leave behind individualism and unsustainable structures and create support for striving towards human wellbeing and flourishing for all.¹¹⁹ Additionally, we would need to find ways to free ourselves and others from our current problematic worldview in order to become able to really commit to realising a degrowth society. As indicated in the introduction, far-reaching internal change might be necessary to accomplish this.

At this moment, degrowth scholarship usually focusses only on one or two of the realms in which change seems necessary.¹²⁰ It could, however, be useful to focus on all realms simultaneously in order to create a comprehensive theory on systematically implementing degrowth. A framework that divides our existence into clearly defined categories could be an important tool in this endeavour.

Buch-Hansen and Nesterova suggest that such a required framework could be formed by the 'four-planar social being model' that is part of the work of philosopher Roy Bhaskar.¹²¹ This framework is based on the idea that every social action takes place at four interconnected levels at the same time.¹²² These four dimensions on which a person acts are that of transaction between the person and nature; that of interaction between the person and other persons; that of the person being influenced by and influencing societal structures; and that of the person's inner being.¹²³ This last dimension is central in answering the main question

¹¹⁶ Elisabetta Mocca, "The Local Dimension in Degrowth Literature. A Critical Discussion," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 1 (November 2019): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2019.1696926>.

¹¹⁷ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1.

¹¹⁸ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 15-43.

¹¹⁹ D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, "*Degrowth: A Vocabulary*," 3-6.

¹²⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1.

¹²¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 1.

¹²² Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 53.

¹²³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

of this dissertation. In the following chapter this social being model, that is part of Bhaskar's overall philosophy of science perspective, is further introduced and the benefits of using this model as a framework for degrowth are highlighted.

2.4 Chapter conclusion

Humanity currently faces an ecological and a social crisis. A possible solution to these crises could be reorganising our societal structures in accordance with degrowth. Degrowth proposes replacing economic growth as the main objective by ecological sustainability and wellbeing. A framework is needed to formulate theories on bringing degrowth into practice in a comprehensive way.

Chapter 3: A critical realist framework

As indicated in the previous chapter, the required framework could be formed by the ‘four-planar social being model’ that is part of the work of Indian-British philosopher Roy Bhaskar. This model is a further elaboration of Bhaskar’s ‘transformative model of social activity’, a model that elaborates on the way in which social structures and human agents interact and shape each other.¹²⁴ Both models are embedded in Bhaskar’s overall work, his philosophy of science perspective named ‘critical realism’.

In the following paragraph, a short overview of critical realism is provided. This overview focuses on the aspects of critical realism that are of importance for creating an understanding of the four-planar social being model and its added value for degrowth research. Subsequently, the transformative model of social activity and its function within Bhaskar’s broader work is further explained. The implications that this model has for transforming the current society into a degrowth society is outlined. Against this background, the four-planar social being model is placed and further elaborated. The benefits of using critical realism as a philosophy of science perspective for degrowth research in general and for using the four-planar model in particular, are demonstrated throughout the chapter.

3.1 The proposed framework

3.1.1. Bhaskar’s philosophy of science perspective: critical realism

Critical realism was introduced in the 1970s by Bhaskar who wanted to provide a conceptual framework that would strengthen the social sciences in their ambition to achieve more human emancipation.¹²⁵ Since then the theory has been further developed and tailored to specific social sciences by other scholars.¹²⁶ Critical realism was developed as an alternative to positivism as, historically, positivism was the predominant framework within the sciences.¹²⁷ Critical realism consists of a holistic description of the real world, an account of the way in which knowledge can be derived from it, and a method of letting this knowledge lead to transformative practice. Critical realism’s conceptual framework consists of a theory of being (an ontology), a theory on knowledge production (an epistemology), and a theory of aiming for the emancipation and flourishing of humans (an axiology).¹²⁸ Critical realist epistemology and axiology build on its ontology and are further explained shortly at the end of this paragraph.

¹²⁴ Bhaskar, 116.

¹²⁵ Hartwig, “Ontology of Human Flourishing,” 227.

¹²⁶ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Science of Deep Transformations,” 2.

¹²⁷ Mervyn Hartwig, introduction to *A Realist Theory of Science*, by Roy Bhaskar (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), xiii.

¹²⁸ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Science of Deep Transformations,” 1-2.

According to the positivist perspective, scientists can determine the laws of natural and social reality by using the right scientific method. Bhaskar points out that this is implicitly based on an 'empirical realist' ontology, an ontology that assumes that reality is constituted by phenomena and laws that are directly observable or deducible from what is directly observable. Bhaskar argues against this assumption and proposes the idea that natural and social reality also contains a deep level of hidden structures and phenomena that can never be directly observed or deduced from the directly observable. These unobservable structures, according to Bhaskar, influence the observable structures. The processes that we are able to observe (for example in research) are, therefore, always only a small part of all processes taking place.¹²⁹

According to critical realism, reality exists outside of our minds and will not immediately change when we change our ideas about it.¹³⁰ This is reflected in critical realism's *social ontology* which asserts that we, as human agents, reproduce and transform social reality but never create it, since it is always pre-existent.¹³¹ This position that presents structure and agency as constantly interacting was further developed in Bhaskar's transformative model of social activity. This model was deepened by the four-planar social being model, which forms the basis for this further research. This model, which is part of critical realist social ontology, is discussed in section 3.1.3.

Critical realist epistemology builds further on the position that it is not possible to read off facts directly from reality itself. This leads to the idea that there are different ways of deriving facts from reality and that therefore it is not possible for a specific science or scientific method to provide knowledge of reality that is complete. The mechanisms scientists study seldom take place within the strict boundaries of a certain discipline. For this reason, interdisciplinary research can lead to results that are closer to actual reality. Nevertheless, produced knowledge always remains imperfect since it never grasps all of reality. This epistemological position can be seen as very humble.¹³²

Furthermore, critical realism opposes the (arguably) pre-dominant view that scientific research can be and needs to be value-neutral and uncritical. Instead, critical realism states that science should be critical of the social structures that create societal problems, describe these structures, and thereby emancipate persons to change them. Humans should strive to create a better society, a society in which all members can flourish. Scientists should therefore conduct research with the aim of working towards this common good.¹³³

¹²⁹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 3-5.

¹³⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 3-5.

¹³¹ Roy Bhaskar, "Critical Realism and the Ontology of Persons," *Journal of Critical Realism* 19, no. 2 (March 2020): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2020.1734736>.

¹³² Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 6.

¹³³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 6-8.

Bhaskar states that once mere survival is no longer in danger, universal human flourishing becomes the main goal. He then asks what mechanisms could take humanity towards this goal.¹³⁴

Within critical realism humans are seen as originating from and being part of nature. Unfortunately, we have largely lost awareness of this fact, which causes us to become alienated from nature, each other, social structures, and our selves. We need to gain understanding of this alienation to be able to resolve it and move towards universal human flourishing.¹³⁵ In Bhaskar's view, universal human flourishing entails every person having the opportunity to live a good life, in which their needs are fulfilled and they can freely develop themselves.¹³⁶

The goal of realising a situation of universal human flourishing is in line with the degrowth objective of creating a society in which human wellbeing is a central aim. Critical realism and degrowth share the goal of working towards the common good of humans.¹³⁷ The fact that critical realism shares one of degrowth's core objectives makes it a suitable theory for degrowth researchers to engage with.

3.1.2. The transformative model of social activity

According to Bhaskar, social sciences are filled with apparent contradictions. He wants to solve these contradictions in a rational way when setting up the critical realist framework.¹³⁸ One of these detected contradictions is between structure and agency.¹³⁹ This apparent contradiction entails the idea that social structure forms persons on the one hand and that persons, as bearers of 'agency', create social structures on the other.¹⁴⁰ In order to do research on social structures and social change, it is essential to conceptualise the way in which agency and social structures interact with each other. This issue is of special importance within degrowth research, since challenging the current societal structures and describing ways of transforming them are central within this field.¹⁴¹

Bhaskar solves this apparent contradiction between structure and agency in the *transformative model of social activity* (hereafter: TMSA).¹⁴² This model entails the idea that society and its social forms are always pre-existing and are being reproduced and transformed only by persons using their 'human agency'.¹⁴³ In Bhaskar's words '[s]ociety is both the ever-

¹³⁴ Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 71.

¹³⁵ Hartwig, "Ontology of Human Flourishing," 232.

¹³⁶ Bhaskar, 100.

¹³⁷ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 8.

¹³⁸ Bhaskar, "Ontology of Persons," 115-16.

¹³⁹ Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 4.

¹⁴¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 4.

¹⁴² Bhaskar, "Ontology of Persons," 116.

¹⁴³ Bhaskar, 116.

present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency'.¹⁴⁴ In this 'duality of structure', structure is both the medium and the result of the actions of agents.¹⁴⁵ In Bhaskar's view, persons and society are mutually ontologically dependent.¹⁴⁶ Persons are produced and changed by society throughout their whole lives. Simultaneously, these same persons transform or reproduce society by acting in certain ways. Following the TMSA can help degrowth scholars to gain an understanding of the way in which society and its agents are in constant interplay with each other.

When performing conscious actions, persons (as actors) unconsciously reproduce and transform the structures. These structures that are being reproduced and sometimes even changed by the actions of persons, are the same structures that condition these actions of persons in the first place.¹⁴⁷ For example, people do not purchase short-lived material things in order to sustain the hyper-consumerist society, but these actions of purchase nevertheless yield the continued existence of hyper-consumerism as their unintended result. At the same time, hyper-consumerism is also the necessary pre-existing condition for these actions of purchase.

This pre-existence of structures means that, even though persons reproduce and transform structures, they can never fully create them (as if starting from a blank slate). New institutions or social entities can be formed but this always takes place within the framework of the social structures that already exist.¹⁴⁸ Actors always act within structural limits and possibilities that they did not cause themselves.¹⁴⁹ This would imply that the necessary changes need to take place within already existing social structures in order to bring degrowth into practice. To establish a degrowth society, the current structures that are not in line with it therefore need to be (drastically) transformed, since it is not possible to replace them with entirely new structures. Moreover, the current structures that are already in accordance with the degrowth ideal need to be reproduced.¹⁵⁰ Within this process, the existing structures condition the human action taking place. The existing structures thereby also condition the actions taken by agents with the goal of transforming the current capitalist society into the envisioned degrowth society.¹⁵¹ This insight needs to be accounted for when describing the role of individual agents in the process of materializing degrowth.

¹⁴⁴ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1979), 43.

¹⁴⁵ Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 54.

¹⁴⁶ Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994), 144-146.

¹⁴⁷ Bhaskar, *Naturalism*, 44.

¹⁴⁸ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 2.

¹⁴⁹ Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 54.

¹⁵⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 2.

¹⁵¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 4.

The TMSA is constructed along the lines of Karl Marx's famous idea that persons do create their own history, but they do not create the conditions under which this creation process takes place. Actions are both shaped by a person's position within a structure and simultaneously create changes in that same structure.¹⁵² This does not mean that the reproduction and transformation of society is a mechanical process that results automatically from the existing conditions. Instead it is an 'achievement' of actively acting persons. Societal structures create the conditions within which human action takes place, but human action itself is nevertheless intentional.¹⁵³

Within this social ontology, both society and human acting have a 'dual character'. For society, this dual character is the fact that society is both the condition and the outcome of human actions. The dual character of human acting is that it consists of both 'conscious production' and (usually) unconscious 'reproduction of the conditions of production', meaning reproduction of society and its structures.¹⁵⁴ Human acts are conscious, but they often unconsciously reproduce the structures that are also the condition for these conscious acts. Nevertheless, conscious acting results in conscious production. It is therefore possible to consciously work towards transforming a certain situation or structure, instead of merely reproducing the way in which that specific situation or structure is shaped at that moment. This is possible as the result of human intentionality. This intentionality is based on the idea that humans, unlike animals, have a certain neurophysiological complexity which allows them to not just initiate transformations, and monitor and reflect upon the way in which they act to initiate these transformations, but to also monitor and reflect upon the way in which this *first-order* monitoring and reflecting happens. This ability of *second-order monitoring* makes humans able to understand and even transform the way in which they monitor their own actions and behaviour.¹⁵⁵

First-order monitoring entails monitoring our actions and reflecting on them. The type of thinking process that constitutes this monitoring and reflecting can be seen as formed by our perception of a given situation and thus by our beliefs, values, and goals. Our viewpoints therefore directly shape our acting in the process of first-order monitoring.

The idea of second-order monitoring is of special interest for this dissertation because it implies that humans play an active role in shaping the way in which they exercise first-order monitoring. Not only can we shape our own actions, we can also shape the thinking processes that result in us shaping those actions.

Bringing degrowth into practice will involve deep and structural changes in our society and everyday life.¹⁵⁶ According to the TMSA, these changes will only happen if agents intentionally act towards creating these changes. The way in which these agents act has the current

¹⁵² Mervyn Hartwig, *Dictionary of Critical Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 423-24.

¹⁵³ Bhaskar, *Naturalism*, 44.

¹⁵⁴ Bhaskar, 44.

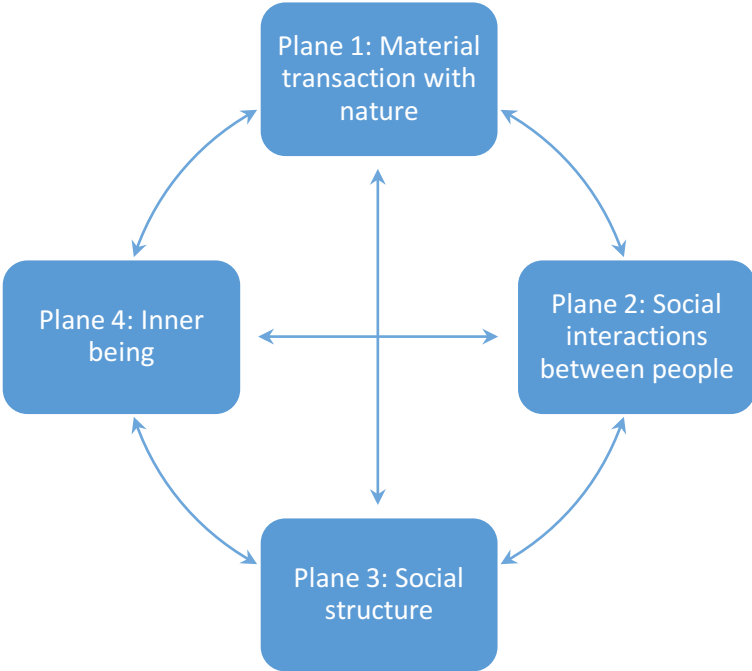
¹⁵⁵ Bhaskar, 44.

¹⁵⁶ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1.

capitalist society and its growth-based structures as its condition, but within these constraints agents can still decide to consciously act towards transforming the structures that are not in line with degrowth. In order to do this, agents need to use their ability of second-order monitoring to change the way in which they themselves shape their actions. This shaping of our actions, that happens via first-order monitoring, needs to be transformed in order to bring it in line with degrowth and its objectives. In short, this means that we need to use our ability of second-order monitoring to create transformations in our first-order monitoring in a way that will make us shape our actions towards materializing degrowth. The goal of this research is to find out what these transformations in our first-order monitoring, thus in our shaping of our actions, could entail.

3.1.3. The four-planar social being model

Figure 1
Simplified representation of the four-planar social being model;
 drafted as part of this dissertation.



To further deepen the TMSA, Bhaskar then developed it into the *four-planar social being model*.¹⁵⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the basic idea of this model is that every social action or event and all social being necessarily occurs at four interdependent

¹⁵⁷ Hartwig, introduction to *“Realist Theory of Science,”* xvi.

dimensions at the same time.¹⁵⁸ These four dimensions are called planes.¹⁵⁹ A simplified version of the model can be found in figure 1. The first plane of this model is (1) ‘the plane of material transaction with nature’, which reflects the fact that we are dependent on nature in everything we do. The second plane, (2) ‘the plane of social interactions between people’, concerns the role of the people around us in our lives and actions. The third plane, (3) ‘the plane of social structure’, is about social structures themselves and their influence on us.¹⁶⁰ The fourth and last plane is named (4) ‘the plane of inner being’. This plane involves our views, values and goals.¹⁶¹ This plane reflects who we are as human beings.¹⁶² Every act and every form of exercising our agency originates in this plane.¹⁶³

On the plane of inner being, the process of thinking about and shaping who we are takes place.¹⁶⁴ This plane represents the part of our being in the world on which the process of using our ability of second-order monitoring in order to create transformations in our first-order monitoring needs to take place (in a way that makes it consistent with degrowth). We will only be able to act in ways that promote degrowth after these *transformations of ourselves by ourselves* have taken place. Transformations on this fourth plane are transformations within oneself and are therefore called *self-transformations*.¹⁶⁵

According to Bhaskar, actual and positive societal change can only take place when actions are taken on all the four planes.¹⁶⁶ Degrowth can be seen as real change since it challenges the way our current society is organised at its core. This implies that according to critical realism, transformations that are envisioned by the degrowth movement will only materialize if actions are taken on each of the four planes.

Using the social being model can be valuable for degrowth scholarship since it emphasises that changes on different dimensions of our being are necessary to achieve degrowth. Current degrowth research often only takes into account some of the dimensions and is thereby unable to give a comprehensive account of the necessary transformations.¹⁶⁷

According to critical realist theory, the first three planes are dependent on the fourth plane in the sense that all acts performed by human agents originate from this plane. Transformations in our first-order monitoring need to take place in order to shape our actions towards changing the growth-based structures and interacting with both humans and non-humans in

¹⁵⁸ Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 53.

¹⁵⁹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Less and More,” 2.

¹⁶⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Science of Deep Transformations,” 5.

¹⁶¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Less and More,” 1.

¹⁶² Hartwig, “Ontology of Human Flourishing,” 228.

¹⁶³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Less and More,” 3.

¹⁶⁴ Hartwig, “Ontology of Human Flourishing,” 228.

¹⁶⁵ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Less and More,” 7.

¹⁶⁶ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 2.

¹⁶⁷ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 5.

accordance with degrowth’s objectives. In this way degrowth transformations on the fourth plane form the foundation of degrowth transformations on the first three planes.¹⁶⁸

It is therefore of major importance to have a clear understanding of the kind of transformations that need to happen on this plane of inner being. Unfortunately, degrowth literature so far has paid little attention to this plane.¹⁶⁹ For these reasons, transformations that need to happen on this plane in order to move towards a degrowth society play a key role in this research.

Transformations that are necessary on the first three planes, in order to materialize degrowth, are further explained in section 3.2. All of these transformations ultimately depend on human actions and therefore on transformations on the plane of inner being.

3.2 The first three ‘planes of being’ filled in for degrowth

The global outlines of the proposed necessary deep transformations on all four planes are already discussed by Buch-Hansen and Nesterova in their article ‘Less and more’.¹⁷⁰ The list of less and more items that they drafted as part of this discussion is added below as figure 3. This section shortly summarizes the first three planes within the degrowth project, as outlined by Buch-Hansen and Nesterova.

Figure 3
List of items we need less and more of on the planes of the four-planar social being model in order to materialise degrowth;

source: Hubert Buch-Hansen and Iana Nesterova. “Less and More: Conceptualising Degrowth Transformations.” *Ecological Economics* 205 (March 2023): page 3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2022.107731>.

	Less	More
<i>Transactions with nature</i>	Matter and energy throughput, extractivism and instrumental treatment of nature, waste, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, production and consumption of unnecessary goods, transportation/food miles, built environments, artificial obsolescence	Cleaner energy forms, regard for planetary boundaries, valuing and preserving biodiversity and life, place-sensitivity, place-based activities/localisation, nature-based economic activities
<i>Social interactions between persons</i>	Competitiveness, greed, individualism, intolerance, racism, sexism, climate change denial, homophobia, xenophobia, hate, fear, alienation, instrumental treatment of humans	Empathy, compassion, peacefulness, solidarity, sufficiency, kindness, generosity and tolerance of diversity, spontaneous right action, fellow-feeling, respect and concern for others, care, mutual learning, democracy
<i>Social structures</i>	Growth imperative, competition, inequality, patriarchy, rigid hierarchies, bureaucracy, structures of oppression, exploitation, domination, poverty, suffering	Collaboration, equal distribution of economic and other resources, flat hierarchies
<i>Inner being</i>	Egoism and ego-realisation, egocentrism, equating the ego with the self, short-term orientation, entitlement, possessiveness and materialism (“to have”), hedonism	Love, creativity, oneness, gentleness towards being and beings, awareness, curiosity, transcending the narrow ego/self, seeing oneself as part of the broader existence, self-realisation, fulfilment, harmony, joy, reflection/mindfulness

¹⁶⁸ Nesterova, “Change in Values,” 8.
¹⁶⁹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Less and More,” 7.
¹⁷⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 2-3.

3.2.1. Material transactions with nature

Within this plane degrowth would first of all mean radically reducing our material and energy use. We would need to fundamentally change our ways of production and consumption in order to cause far less waste, less pollution and less CO2. We will only be able to transform in this way, if large changes in our attitude towards nature take place. Our treatment of nature has to become less exploitative and our view of nature less instrumentalist.¹⁷¹

3.2.1 Social interactions between persons

Changes on this plane would entail a different way of interacting with fellow humans. Interaction that is productive for bringing degrowth into practice would have to be based on feelings of solidarity and fellowship. This implies that detrimental forms of competitiveness and thorough individualism need to be eliminated from social interaction. Looking down on others for being different, which results in sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination should be replaced by respect and delight for the diversity of persons.¹⁷²

3.2.3 Social structures

Degrowth evolves from a critique on our current society and its structures that are harmful to both the people and the planet. These structures include the overall capitalist, growth-based socio-economic structure and the accompanying structures of consumerism, extractivism, commodification, hierarchy, and domination of certain groups over others. Degrowth has the ambition to emancipate humans to change these structures that stand between them and their flourishing.¹⁷³

Necessary transformation on the plane of social structures would involve the change of our societal structures in a way that society becomes much more about collaboration instead of competition. Existing hierarchies need to be flattened out. Most importantly, the large economic and social inequality that is present in current societies needs to be removed.¹⁷⁴ This can only happen by liberating our societies from the 'structures of oppression, exploitation and domination' that we are faced with today, three things that we need less of on this plane according to Buch-Hansen and Nesterova.¹⁷⁵ The growth imperative would no longer rule our social structures. Instead collaborative relations and the equal distribution of resources would be the leading values on this plane after the successful transformation.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 2.

¹⁷² Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 2-3.

¹⁷³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 6-7.

¹⁷⁴ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

¹⁷⁵ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 3.

¹⁷⁶ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 3.

Within the TMSA social structures are seen as both the condition for and the result of human actions. The necessary changes on this plane would have to take place by transforming (instead of merely reproducing) the currently existing structures, since creating entirely new social structures is not possible.

3.3 Chapter conclusion

A framework that could be used to bring degrowth into practice is the four-planar social being model that was introduced by philosopher Roy Bhaskar as part of his critical realist philosophy of science. This model is based on the idea that every action or event take place at four interdependent dimensions at the same time. On each of these dimensions changes that need to take place to materialize degrowth can be mentioned.

Chapter 4: Deriving pathways for self-transformation

In this chapter, the first steps are made towards answering the research question by proposing pathways for self-transformation on Bhaskar's plane of inner being. These pathways could be followed to become capable of actualizing degrowth's objectives. The final goal of this chapter is to present different transformations that need to happen on the fourth plane to enable someone to act towards materialising degrowth on the other three planes. The insights from the previous chapters function as the background against which this takes place.

To clarify the exact 'location' on which the proposed transformations would take place, this chapter first looks into the meaning of inner being within Bhaskar's framework. Thereafter, the importance of changes on this plane for the degrowth project are demonstrated. Once these inquiries are completed, the project of 'filling in Bhaskar's fourth plane' starts by deriving several pathways of transformation on the plane of inner being from the less and more list that Buch-Hansen and Nesterova propose in their article. These proposed pathways are deepened in the fifth chapter.

4.1 The plane of 'inner being'

The plane of inner being, the fourth plane of Bhaskar's social being model, will now be further explained and elaborated in the wider context of Bhaskar's work. This plane entails both who we are and our sense of self, and the way in which we think about who we are.¹⁷⁷ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova call the transformations on the fourth plane 'changes in how we are as human beings'. This dimension of inner being involves the things we value and the things we strive towards. It is also the dimension on which we accept or reject certain (world)views.¹⁷⁸ As explained in earlier chapters, transformation on this plane takes place through a process of self-transformation. This is further explained in section 4.2.

Within the TMSA human actions are viewed as intentional.¹⁷⁹ These intentional human actions, the results of the exercising of agency, always start off from the plane of inner being.¹⁸⁰ We initiate actions and thereby societal change from our inner being. The importance of this plane cannot be overemphasised when following the view that all transformations in society ultimately depend upon actions by agents. From our inner being, we both first-order monitor and shape all our actions, and we second-order monitor and reflect on the values and goals that are central within our first-order monitoring.¹⁸¹ As mentioned in section 3.1.2, first-order monitoring is the thinking process that shapes our

¹⁷⁷ Hartwig, "Ontology of Human Flourishing," 228.

¹⁷⁸ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1.

¹⁷⁹ Bhaskar, *Naturalism*, 44.

¹⁸⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

¹⁸¹ Bhaskar, *Naturalism*, 44.

actions. Second-order monitoring is what makes us able to understand and transform this (first-order) thinking process and the values, views, and goals that form this process.

This chapter builds towards suggesting pathways of transformations that need to take place in the (first-order) thinking process. The views and values that form (first-order) thinking and thereby our actions would need to, for example, become less based on being in constant competition with others for goods that are perceived as scarce and more based on wanting to share with others the goods that are perceived as abundantly available. This and other proposed transformations in our first-order monitoring can become initiated by conscious second-order monitoring. This would entail using our (second-order) ability to transform our first-order monitoring to make ourselves follow the proposed pathways of transformations on the level of our first-order monitoring. In short, following the proposed pathways would take place in our first-order monitoring, but it would have to be initiated by our second-order monitoring. This whole process would take place within our inner being.

The concept of inner being is also a key element of Bhaskar's late work, the theory of metaReality. To elaborate a little further on Bhaskar's view of inner being in general and the processes that can take place within it, the role of inner being within this theory is now briefly explained. Bhaskar writes about the important role of self-transformation of our inner being in the process of creating a society in which everyone can flourish.¹⁸² In Bhaskar's theory, our self has a *ground state*. This ground state is described as an absolute, solid core of our self, that one is unable to lose.¹⁸³ In this ground state we have everything we need to work towards a society of human flourishing; we are filled with love and care for other beings.¹⁸⁴ In addition, one also has an *embodied personality*.¹⁸⁵ This embodied personality is a sense of self that is real, but only in a relative and changeable way. When our values, beliefs, or priorities change, our embodied personality changes. Additionally, the factors in one's life which are part of this sense of self differ between persons and between stages of life. One's profession, friends, or hair colour are part of this embodied personality, as long as one sees these as part of one's identity.¹⁸⁶ The elements of our embodied personality can be either consistent or inconsistent with the ground state. The goals and priorities of an agent are contradictory and unstable when their embodied personality is not in accordance with their ground state. Creating transformations in the direction of a society of 'universal human flourishing' happens by creating consistency between our embodied personality and our ground state.¹⁸⁷ This process would take place on the fourth plane of the four-planar social being model.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, it

¹⁸² Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 164-65.

¹⁸³ Bhaskar, 164-65.

¹⁸⁴ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 7.

¹⁸⁵ Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense*, 164-65.

¹⁸⁶ Bhaskar, 162-163.

¹⁸⁷ Bhaskar, 164-165.

¹⁸⁸ Bhaskar, 194-196.

can be stated that both the embodied personality and the ground state are part of our inner being.

According to Bhaskar's view, transformations in the embodied personality need to happen in order to create a society in which wellbeing and human flourishing are central. The ability to realise this society is already present in the ground state. Thus, a process of getting rid of all elements of the embodied personality that are not in line with this ground state needs to take place.¹⁸⁹

Whether this process of bringing one's embodied personality into alignment with one's ground state would entail changes only at the level of first-order monitoring or also at the level of second-order monitoring is difficult to tell. Nevertheless, this process would probably have some overlap with the process of self-transformation in one's first-order monitoring to make oneself able to act in accordance with degrowth. The reason for this is that the processes share the goal of changing someone's inner being to enable them to act towards materialising a society in which human wellbeing is central. This common goal of critical realism and degrowth has already been pointed out in the third chapter.

When following this argument, implementing the three pathways of transformation as proposed in section 4.3 could arguably add towards Bhaskar's proposed project of reconciling the embodied personality with the ground state. The main purpose of proposing the implementation of these pathways of transformation is, nevertheless, bringing our inner being and thereby our acts more and more in line with degrowth's objectives, and thereby working towards materializing a degrowth society.

4.2 The need for a further elaboration on self-transformation

4.2.1. Transformations on the fourth plane

In the article 'Less and more: Conceptualising degrowth transformations', scholars Buch-Hansen and Nesterova point out that degrowth would entail fundamental changes on Bhaskar's fourth plane, the plane of inner being. According to them, this plane has been 'most neglected' within the degrowth movement while transformations on this plane are of the 'utmost importance'. The importance of this plane should not be underestimated, since it is only from this plane that persons can act and thereby exercise their agency.¹⁹⁰ As mentioned in section 3.1.3, changes on this plane entail changes within oneself by oneself: self-transformation.¹⁹¹ Bhaskar himself was a dedicated advocate of self-transformation as

¹⁸⁹ Bhaskar, 194-196.

¹⁹⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

¹⁹¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 7.

originator of social change. He believed that all societal change has to begin with self-change of the members of society.¹⁹²

Self-transformation would of course not happen immediately. Creating large shifts in oneself is a long-term process that demands lots of determination.¹⁹³ Importantly, the fact that this self-transformation process takes place within oneself does not mean that the incentive for this process also needs to come from within oneself. Self-transformations could be encouraged by external factors since, according to the TMSA, we always find ourselves within pre-existing structures that influence us. Within pre-existing structures encouragement would have to come, to a large extent, from institutions and practices that are already present in the current society.¹⁹⁴ Some more reflection on bringing the proposed transformations into practice are made in section 5.4.

4.2.2 The importance of self-transformation

According to the TMSA, exercising agency is the way in which people can change social structures and thereby their society. As Bhaskar points out, all societal transformation depends on the self-transformation of agents.¹⁹⁵ Transforming our current capitalist growth-based society into a degrowth society can only happen if we, as members of our society, collectively self-transform in order to use our agency to transform the structure. This makes research on transformation on the plane of inner being essential, in order to create a society that has degrowth as its core value.

Not acknowledging this importance of changes in the self, by only focusing on changes in the system, denies the importance of individual acts and disempowers human agents. It also discourages scholars to do research on the self-change that is necessary to create societal shifts.¹⁹⁶ Therefore, the following section and the fifth chapter attempt to make an addition towards filling in the ‘inner being gap’ in degrowth literature, that was detected by Buch-Hansen and Nesterova.¹⁹⁷ The purpose of the attempt to (partly) fill in this gap is to strengthen the theory of degrowth.

An idea that is closely linked to the proposed process of self-transformation is that of the *decolonization of the imaginary*. This idea entails that a process has to take place in which we actively free our thoughts and imagination, and thereby our institutions, from the domination of the growth-imperative. Serge Latouche, one of the most renowned degrowth scholars,

¹⁹² Roy Bhaskar, *Reflections on MetaReality: Transcendence, Emancipation and Everyday Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 100.

¹⁹³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Less and More,” 4.

¹⁹⁴ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 4.

¹⁹⁵ Bhaskar, *Reflections on MetaReality*, 100.

¹⁹⁶ Nesterova, “Change in Values,” 7.

¹⁹⁷ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, “Less and More,” 3.

advocates for this decolonization-process.^{198 199} This dissertation can be seen as part of this project, since the active transformation of our inner being away from the predominant ideology of growth, arguably covers a large part of what is meant by decolonizing ourselves from the ideology of growth.

4.3 Proposing pathways of self-transformation

Within this section the changes that are necessary within the plane of inner being are structured by dividing them into different pathways. These different pathways are based on the proposed less and more items of Buch-Hansen and Nesterova. In chapter 5 these proposed pathways are elaborated and deepened with insights from scholars that work within degrowth, critical realism, or other relevant fields. These different perspectives are added to strengthen the proposed pathways of transformation by expanding them.

Following all proposed paths could ultimately enable a person to act towards realising a degrowth society. Furthermore, the categorisation could form a starting point for further research into the necessary transformations in the inner being. It is meant as a general invitation for other scholars to place their research within one of the pathways of transformation or to link existing theories to one or several of these proposed pathways. In addition, proposing these pathways aims to make it easier to take concrete actions to accomplish the self-transformations. The proposed pathways of transformation could, for example, become concrete objectives within a teaching program or a cultural project. Different routes of bringing the proposed transformations into action are discussed in section 5.4.

In their article, Buch-Hansen and Nesterova conclude that people's inner being would need **less** '[e]goism and ego-realisation, egocentrism, equating the ego with the self, short-term orientation, entitlement, possessiveness and materialism ("to have"), hedonism' and **more** '[l]ove, creativity, oneness, gentleness towards being and beings, awareness, curiosity, transcending the narrow ego/self, seeing oneself as part of the broader existence, self-realisation, fulfilment, harmony, joy, reflection/ mindfulness' in order to actualize degrowth.²⁰⁰ These suggestions imply the necessity of a radically different way of experiencing ourselves and our place in the world. Materializing these changes on the plane of inner being could result in actors shaping their actions in line with degrowth's objectives.²⁰¹

From the list of less and more items that Buch-Hansen and Nesterova's propose, different overall 'routes of transformation' can be derived. These routes will form the pathways of self-transformation.

¹⁹⁸ Giorgos Kallis, "In Defence of Degrowth," *Ecological Economics* 70, no. 5 (March 2011): 877, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2010.12.007>.

¹⁹⁹ Latouche, "Decolonization of Imaginary," 117-20.

²⁰⁰ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

²⁰¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, 7.

Moving away from egoism, ego-realisation, and egocentrism towards seeing oneself as part of the broader existence and being gentler towards being and beings entails a shift in the way one sees one's own position in relation to others. Transcending one's narrow self and cultivating a feeling of oneness can also be seen as part of this same shift. This shift relates to the extent in which you experience yourself as part of and as responsible for other beings. A first pathway that can be derived from these shifts, is that from a dualistic, egocentric view towards a view of oneness, an interwovenness with other beings and one's surrounding. This pathway is further elaborated in section 5.1.

No longer equating the ego with the self and striving less for material and immaterial possession and instead more towards self-realisation, harmony, reflection and joy would entail a turnaround of someone's priorities and goals. It would also involve a whole new way of assessing one's accomplishments and forming a self-image. A pathway of transformation that can be derived from these shifts (and that is shortly mentioned in Buch-Hansen and Nesterova's article) is that from a view in which one is mostly concerned with 'having' towards a view in which one is more concerned with 'being'. The transformation that is necessary to reach this mode of being is further explained in section 5.2.

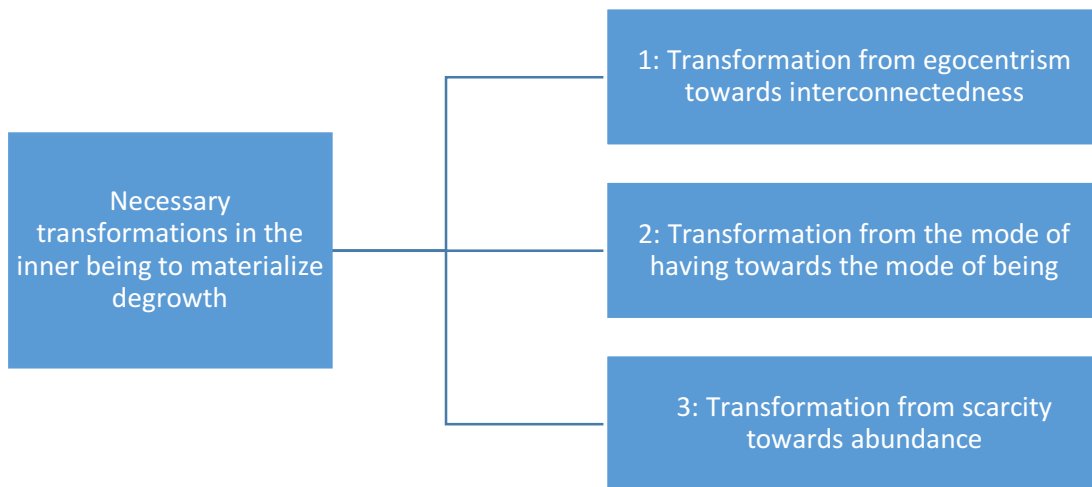
A third clear 'transformation route' is formed by the proposed shift from entitlement towards fulfilment. This shift is directly linked to the shift from having towards being, but while that shift relates to one's desires and goals, this shift relates to the level of experienced fulfilment in one's current position. The common perspective of entitlement, is arguably connected to feelings of scarcity and greed while the pursued perspective of fulfilment, could be built around the notions of abundance and gratitude. Aiming to create more awareness and mindfulness in one's life can be seen as forming part of this transformation since awareness and mindfulness are necessary to be able to fully appreciate the gifts given to us by nature and other humans. Fully appreciating these gifts and thereby realising that our current position is one of (material) abundance, could make us feel fulfilled instead of entitled. Section 5.3 further elaborates this claim.

The three transformation paths that will thus be discussed further in the next chapter are schematically depicted in figure 2. This division is only one of many possible divisions that could be based on Buch-Hansen and Nesterova's less and more list. Furthermore, other sources to base transformation pathways on could be consulted. Therefore, the derived pathways of transformation are in not meant to be definite or exhaustive, but merely as one possible structuration.

In the following chapters, the three proposed types of transformation that were outlined above are referred to as *pathways of transformation*. This is to distinguish these specific proposals from general changes that are suggested in degrowth literature.

Figure 2

Three proposed pathways of transformations in the inner being to materialise degrowth;
drafted as part of this dissertation.



4.4 Chapter conclusion

The fourth plane of Bhaskar's model, that of inner being, seems to be under-highlighted within degrowth literature. Transformations that need to take place on this plane can be seen as transformations within oneself by oneself: self-transformations. On the basis of the outlines of what these self-transformations could entail, that are proposed by Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, three pathways of transformation are proposed that could be followed to enable oneself to act in accordance with degrowth: A transformation from egocentrism to interconnectedness, a transformation from mainly living in the mode of having towards mainly living in the mode of being, and finally, a transformation from a feeling of scarcity to a feeling of abundance. The following chapter elaborates on each of these changes.

Chapter 5: Elaboration of the three pathways

In this chapter, the three pathways of transformation in the inner being, that were proposed at the end of the previous chapter, are discussed and elaborated one by one. This is carried out by outlining the transformation that Buch-Hansen and Nesterova suggest and subsequently developing their idea by complementing it with diverse theories that are either part of the fields of degrowth or critical realism, or of other relevant fields of study. The three proposed pathways of self-transformation need to be followed simultaneously to emancipate oneself for bringing degrowth into practice. Once each pathway has been elaborated on, some ways in which the pathways could be brought into practice are discussed.

The first section discusses the transformation from egocentrism towards interconnectedness. Section two investigates the transformation from our current 'mode of having' to a 'mode of being'. The third section elaborates on the shift from a feeling of scarcity towards a feeling of abundance. Finally, section four discusses different proposals of bringing the suggested transformations into practice.

5.1 The first pathway of transformation: From egocentrism towards interconnectedness

This first proposed pathway of transformation is based on Buch-Hansen and Nesterova's suggestions of transforming one's ego-centred worldview into a worldview of interconnectedness with all beings. This requires the development of the capacity to effectively see oneself as a part of broader existence.²⁰²

5.1.1 Alienation from our interconnectedness

Critical realism poses the view that we were essentially free but became 'enslaved' when we forgot or started misinterpreting our position: that we originated from nature and that we are part of nature's overall unity and creativity. This caused our alienation on all four planes: our alienation from nature, from other humans, from our social structures and from our inner being.²⁰³ Our alienation on the first plane (our alienation from nature) becomes visible in the way in which we treat nature as something external to us, from which we can endlessly extract resources without keeping its wellbeing and its connectedness with us in mind.

Degrowth theory criticizes this ongoing process of extraction from nature, which is one of the core features of the current capitalist system.²⁰⁴ The way in which this extraction is carried out is based on a dualistic ontology. Within this theory of being, humans and nature are seen

²⁰² Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

²⁰³ Hartwig, "Ontology of Human Flourishing," 232.

²⁰⁴ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 15-43.

as fundamentally distinct from each other. Humans are viewed as something with agency and a soul, while nature on the other hand is viewed as just a mechanistic object.²⁰⁵

This dualistic view of humans and nature as two distinct entities was introduced by 17th century philosopher René Descartes. According to his view, which influences Western thinking to this day, the world surrounding us humans is nothing more than a soulless machine that functions according to explicable universal laws. Humans, the only creatures with souls, can master and possess nature. Creating this image of nature as inanimate legitimizes the remorseless exploitation of all its beings.²⁰⁶

5.1.2 We are all one entity

Shortly after Descartes drafted his theory of dualism, philosopher Baruch Spinoza emerged as fierce opponent of this idea. After studying Descartes, Spinoza formulated his own theory in which he comes to the overall conclusion that God (or as he also calls it: nature) is an uncaused and substantial whole. Nature is the only thing there is, everything around us and we ourselves are part of nature and created by it.²⁰⁷ This monist theory entails that God, human beings and nature are all made from one and the same substance.²⁰⁸ Or in the words of a Buddhist monk ‘we are all one entity’.²⁰⁹

A question that emerges is what embracing this view, which is opposite to the customary dualism, would mean for the way in which we shape our relationship with non-humans and nature in general. This question is currently being explored by diverse actors in the public debate. For instance, for the Belgian philosophy month in April 2022, Tine Hens wrote an essay with the title ‘The world we share’ (original Dutch title: ‘De wereld die we delen’).²¹⁰ In this essay, she explores our relationship with nature and her diverse members. She asks herself how it is possible that we act so little while we know so much (about the ongoing ecological crisis). Her answer is that we have lost the connection to our environment. We have created the fiction that humans are somehow separated from nature, looking down on it from our artificial place at the top of the pyramid. This is in sharp contrast with the insights from different natural sciences, that we are at all times in interplay with bacteria, fungi, insects, birds, and trees. Our health is closely intertwined with the health of smaller and bigger non-humans, our survival is completely dependent on them.²¹¹

Correspondingly, in the critical realist perspective humans are seen as inherently interconnected with all humans and non-humans with whom we share this earth.²¹² Bhaskar

²⁰⁵ Hickel, 15-43.

²⁰⁶ Tine Hens, *De Wereld die We Delen* (Berchem: Uitgeverij EPO, 2022), 25-38.

²⁰⁷ Steven Nadler, “Baruch Spinoza,” In *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), 229.

²⁰⁸ Hens, *De Wereld*, 33.

²⁰⁹ Quote from Buddhist monk Daido (whom my mother personally knows).

²¹⁰ Tine Hens, *De Wereld die We Delen* (Berchem: Uitgeverij EPO, 2022).

²¹¹ Hens, *De Wereld*, 1-78.

²¹² Nesterova, “Change in Values,” 7.

states that a fruitful transformation of society is only possible if the members of society become aware of this interconnectedness and expand their focus from only including themselves to including all of existence.²¹³ This will cause persons to feel deep compassion and concern for the other beings, which is an important incentive to create a society that is no longer based on the exploitation of people and nature.²¹⁴

This notion of seeing oneself as interconnected with all life on earth also forms the hearth of the *Gaia metaphor*. Gaia, our planet personified as a goddess, came into existence as part of Greek mythology. In 1974, chemist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis, brought the metaphor back to attention by using it as the name for the theory that all living beings are part of a 'web of relations' that in interaction with their environment form the life-conditions on planet earth.²¹⁵ The Gaia-metaphor shows that we humans are not above or even next to nature, instead, we are part of this large ecosystem as active agents.²¹⁶ Sociologist and eco-philosopher Bruno Latour paints a picture of Gaia as neither our friend nor our enemy, and certainly not our caring mother.²¹⁷ Instead Gaia is a partner with whom we need to work together, since we are at the same time threatening her and being threatened by her.²¹⁸ Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers states that the concept of Gaia fundamentally changes the way in which we view ourselves, others, the planet we live on, and the relations between those three entities.²¹⁹

Both Latour and Stengers engage with the question of how a deeper awareness of our situation with regard to Gaia can be communicated to a wider public. To effectively address our ecological challenges, people need to understand their interconnectedness with all humans and non-humans, and the dependence of their wellbeing on the wellbeing of the planet. This understanding needs to go deeper than just a cognitive understanding, people really need to feel it on an emotional and even spiritual level.²²⁰ Creating understanding in this way, is creating a change in the inner being. A shift in people's imaginary is necessary in order for them to understand their vulnerable position within the earth system.

Another 'philosophy of interconnectedness' is that of the Bantu speaking community in Africa. Their faith named *Ubuntu* entails that being human means taking care of oneself and the other humans and non-humans, that one is in a relationship of interdependence with. This includes the responsibility to care for nature in all its forms and for 'yet-to-be-born generations'.²²¹

²¹³ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Science of Deep Transformations," 8.

²¹⁴ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 1.

²¹⁵ Mink and Brand, *Post-Anthropocentric Economies*, 27.

²¹⁶ Mink and Brand, 44.

²¹⁷ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 75-111.

²¹⁸ Latour, *Parlement van de Dingen*, 43-67.

²¹⁹ Manschot, *Blijf de Aarde Trouw*, 169-71.

²²⁰ Manschot, 169-71.

²²¹ Mogobe B. Ramose, "Ubuntu," In D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, 212-14.

Ubuntu thereby adds future generations to the network of interconnectedness. This obligation to take care of future generations is a clear motivation to abandon 'short-term orientation', which Buch-Hansen and Nesterova cite as something we need less of.²²²

5.1.3 Interconnectedness in practice

In order to really change the way in which we shape our decision concerning non-humans and nature as a whole, we need to find ways to let our awareness of our interconnectedness shape our actual actions. This could happen through transformations in our first-order monitoring that would have to be initiated by our second-order monitoring. One way of practicing interconnectedness, that could be incorporated in the thinking-processes that constitute our first-order monitoring, is *rhizomatic thinking* and decision making. In botanical terminology, a rhizome describes a network of roots. The idea of the rhizome as metaphor for thought was presented by philosopher Deleuze and psychoanalyst Guattari in their famous work 'A thousand plateaus'. It proposes a way of writing and thinking about the world that is opposed to the linear, hierarchical way that is prominent in the western world.²²³

In the theory of the rhizome any point is connected to any other point regardless of the nature of these points. A rhizome has no beginning or end, it is made of lines instead of fixed points and it is completely nonhierarchical.²²⁴ In the concept of the rhizome every small thing, organism or idea in our world is connected to every other thing, organism and idea. All the small things around us together form one whole, which can be seen as an enormous map that goes in every possible direction.²²⁵ Trying to shape our thinking and thereby our acting in accordance with this idea of the rhizome would bring seeing oneself as part of broader existence, which Buch-Hansen and Nesterova propose as something we need more of, into practice.

5.2 The second pathway of transformation: from 'having' towards 'being'

A second path of necessary transformation in the inner being that can be found in the article of Buch-Hansen and Nesterova is the transformation in which an individual leaves their possessiveness and materialism behind and instead starts striving towards harmony, reflection and self-realisation.

²²² Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

²²³ Whitney A. Bauman, *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 46.

²²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21-22.

²²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 12-13.

5.2.1 To Have or to Be?

Buch-Hansen and Nesterova base this switch on an argument by Erich Fromm, that states that individuals should try to make a shift from living primarily in *the mode of having* towards living primarily in *the mode of being*. According to Fromm, most people in capitalist, profit-based society exist and experience mainly in the mode of having.²²⁶ This situation reinforces itself, by making other modes of existing almost unimaginable.²²⁷ Living in this mode entails a focus on accumulating material possessions and status for oneself.²²⁸ In this mode one relates to the world by wanting to possess and own things, other beings, and oneself. The mode of being, on the other hand, is the state of being directly alive in the world without the relationship of possession between oneself and one's surroundings. In this state, we relate to the world in an authentic way, by who we are as human beings.²²⁹ While living in this mode, our wellbeing is no longer constituted by owning goods but instead by personal, social, and spiritual experiences such as friendship, being in harmony with our surroundings, or creating art.²³⁰

According to Fromm, human beings have both modes already present in them.²³¹ The social structure of a society decides which of the two modes will be the primary mode of living for members of that society.²³² This can be linked to the interconnectedness of the four planes of the social being model. Social structures on the level of the third plane, shape the mode that a person's inner being is in, on the level of the fourth plane. The fact that our mode of living is shaped by the social structures does, however, not mean that we cannot attempt to change the mode that we are in. Fromm himself states that it is possible to change our own character from the mode of having into the mode of being. This can happen once we realise that we are suffering in the current situation, that this suffering is caused by existing in the mode of having, and that we have the possibility to end this suffering by transforming our behaviour and way of living.²³³ Transforming ourselves in this way would change the way in which we act and thereby add to changing those same social structures that formed our mode in the first place. Ultimately, this could lead to more and more people living primarily in the mode of being.

Degrowth is far more likely to materialise on all planes of the social being model, once people start living more in the mode of being.²³⁴ Increasingly living in this mode would enable us to no longer base our self-worth on what we have, but instead on who we are as beings that long

²²⁶ Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein: Die Seelischen Grundlagen einer Neuen Gesellschaft*, trans. Brigitte Stein (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979), 89-114.

²²⁷ Colin Lankshear, "On Having and Being: The Humanism of Erich Fromm," *Counterpoints* 168 (2003): 56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42977492>.

²²⁸ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 7.

²²⁹ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 29-43.

²³⁰ Marius de Geus, *Filosofie van de Eenvoud: Vereenvoudiging en Matiging als Verrijking van het Bestaan* (Leiden: Uitgeverij Jan van Arkel, 2015), 300.

²³¹ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 44.

²³² Lankshear, "Humanism of Erich Fromm," 57.

²³³ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 205.

²³⁴ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 7.

for relatedness, love and concern for other beings and our surroundings.²³⁵ This conception is in line with Bhaskar's view that our ground state is one of empathy and care for our fellow beings.²³⁶ Freeing ourselves from the mode of having would be in line with the project of reconciling our embodied personality with our ground state, since it would shift our focus back to our 'ground state properties'. When most people live in accordance with the mode of being, the abolishment of consumerism will proceed smoothly because these people would no longer base their wellbeing on gathering property. This would make degrowth shifts possible on all four planes.

In addition to this, according to Fromm, living in the mode of being would, among other things, lead to a feeling of connectedness with all other beings and the will to work together with them instead of exploiting them for one's own profit.²³⁷ This last aspect of the change from having to being is in line with the first path of transformation in our inner being, interconnectedness, as was illustrated in the previous paragraph.

5.2.2 Voluntary simple living

Striving towards freeing oneself from living in the mode of having can result in embracing the ideal of *voluntary simple living*. This ideal is a core element of many religions such as Buddhism and Christianity; philosophical schools such as, among many others, the Stoics, the Cynics, and the New England Transcendentalists; and movements of alternative living such as the Back-to-the-landers. Degrowth economist Samuel Alexander describes this ideal as consciously minimalizing one's need of material possession in order to have more time to pursue non-materialistic life goals, such as building a strong community, engaging in philosophical projects, growing one's own foods, creating art, doing spiritual practices, or partaking in political activism. Voluntary simple living is about reimagining the kind of life that could be satisfactory and meaningful. The basic premise of this ideal is that we can live happy and fulfilled lives without consuming in ways that cross the planetary boundaries.²³⁸

A specific development of this idea can be found in the writings of degrowth scholar Ted Trainer, who proposes *the Simpler Way perspective*. This degrowth perspective states that the most important shift necessary for the establishment of a degrowth society is not economic or political, but instead cultural. This would entail a shift towards a culture in which people are far less concerned with gaining possession, luxury, and wealth, in constant competition with others. Instead people would strive for non-material sources of satisfaction, for fruitful cooperation with others, and towards communal goals. Once this shift in culture is realised, production and consumption would decrease. According to Trainer, this described simpler

²³⁵ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 208-9.

²³⁶ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 7.

²³⁷ Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, 208-9.

²³⁸ Samuel Alexander, "Simplicity," In D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, 133-39.

way culture can often be found within ecovillages.²³⁹ This claim is further investigated in the sixth chapter of this research.

Dutch philosopher Marius de Geus also advocates for voluntary simple living. As part of his 'philosophy of simplicity' he proposes cultivating the ability of enjoyment of small things and *sustainable hedonism* as important steps towards embracing voluntary simplicity. By the enjoyment of small things, he means the conscious enjoyment of cost-free activities such as going for a walk or having a meaningful conversation. Sustainable hedonism, furthermore, entails deep and intense sensory enjoyment of nature: A spiritual and non-disruptive way of deriving pleasure from animals, plants and landscapes by interacting with them. Watching baby ducklings splashing around in a pond, smelling the scent of an elderflower bush, or feeling the wind blow through one's hair.²⁴⁰ This sustainable hedonism could be an alternative for the egoistic, possessive hedonism that Buch-Hansen and Nesterova name on their list of items that we need less of on the plane of inner being.²⁴¹ Sustainable hedonism is connected to the third pathway of transformation, which is elaborated in the next section, since it is based on deeply appreciating all that nature has to offer.

5.2.3 Leaving consumerism behind

Alexander points out that materialistic values, opposite to voluntary simplicity and sustainable hedonism, are dominant in current society. Nevertheless, the current situation of overconsumption at the expense of our planet makes a shift into the direction of simple living essential.²⁴² Transforming our values, that influence our (first-order) thinking processes and thereby our actions, towards embracing simplicity could be the way to make us act towards the abolition of consumerist society by consuming less and taking political action. Aiming to end consumerism is a key-element of the degrowth movement: it is a vital step in freeing ourselves from the growth-imperative, lowering our production and consumption, and creating pathways to flourish without crossing the planetary and social boundaries.²⁴³

5.3 The third pathway of transformation: From scarcity to abundance

This underlying path of transformation is closely linked to the transformation that was proposed in the previous section. There is however a fundamental difference between the two pathways. The shift from having to being, is a transformation towards being able to live in a way that feels meaningful and satisfied while not consuming more than one's fair share of materials and energy. The shift proposed in this section, the transformation from a feeling

²³⁹ Trainer, "De-Growth: Some Suggestions," 3-4.

²⁴⁰ De Geus, *Filosofie van de Eenvoud*, 291-93.

²⁴¹ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

²⁴² Alexander, "Simplicity," 133-39.

²⁴³ Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, 102.

of scarcity to a feeling of abundance, is not about striving towards alternative sources of fulfilment but instead about getting more fulfilment out of the material and immaterial situation one is in. This transformation is derived from the need for less entitlement and more fulfilment within one's inner being, that Buch-Hansen and Nesterova propose.²⁴⁴

5.3.1 Artificial scarcity

A widespread idea within degrowth and other post-capitalist scholarship is the notion that the capitalist system is based on artificially created scarcity. This scarcity is artificial in the sense that it is not based on an actual situation of scarcity of natural resources, instead the scarcity is created within the mechanism of capitalist consumer-society. Since the origin of humankind there have been more than enough resources to fulfil the basic needs of all humans. Scarcity exists only in the social context.²⁴⁵

Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling states that the current consumerist system is based on a constant feeling of scarcity that is reproduced by the ongoing creation of new needs.²⁴⁶ When in the 1960s the urge to produce and consume became more and more prominent, the idea of scarcity and constantly being unfulfilled was more and more internalised by the members of society.²⁴⁷ People feel there is too little of the things we need to equally share them. Today, both our economy and our political system still function on the basis of this created scarcity.²⁴⁸ Over-consumption will persist as long as this ideology of scarcity remains in place. The constant fear of not having enough creates a claim culture in which society members try to secure as many (material and immaterial) possessions as possible for themselves, in constant competition against all others.²⁴⁹ Over-consumption is one of the direct causes of the global ecological crisis.²⁵⁰ The paradox of our current situation is that imaginary scarcity is upholding a system of growth that threatens us with real scarcity.²⁵¹ The effects of the ecological crisis are causing more and more harvests to fail, land to become infertile, and regions to face shortages of drinking water.²⁵²

²⁴⁴ Buch-Hansen and Nesterova, "Less and More," 3.

²⁴⁵ Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, epilogue to *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 218.

²⁴⁶ Henk Oosterling, "Dasein as Design Or: Must Design Save the World?," *Melintas* 25, no. 1 (April 2009): 5-7, <https://doi.org/10.26593/mel.v25i1.930.1-22>.

²⁴⁷ Oosterling, 8.

²⁴⁸ Henk Oosterling, "Interest and Excess of Modern Man's Radical Mediocrity: Rescaling Sloterdijk's Grandiose Aesthetic Strategy," *Cultural Politics* 3, no. 3 (November 2007): 365-66, Project MUSE, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174307X226898>.

²⁴⁹ Henk Oosterling, "Dasein as Design," 7.

²⁵⁰ Oosterling, 2.

²⁵¹ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 15-43.

²⁵² Hickel, 15-43.

5.3.2 Actual abundance

We therefore need to realise that we actually live on a planet of abundance: that we have enough resources for everyone to fulfil their basic needs, if we divide them in a fair way. Once we equally distribute our wealth, further ‘plundering’ of the earth will no longer be necessary.²⁵³ This contradiction between an internalised ideology of scarcity while living in a situation with enormous (material) abundance, is also of interest when it comes to transforming our inner being. Our dependence on the consumerist, growth-based system can be seen as constituted by a constant feeling of lack. Becoming aware of this contradiction between our perceived and actual position and actively trying to change our perception in accordance with it could be enough to stop the vicious circle of over-production and over-consumption. This is in line with the argument of Kimmerer, who writes that recognizing our position of abundance instead of scarcity would undermine the current economic system that functions by creating unfulfilled desires.²⁵⁴ According to her, changes in the heart and mind are necessary to change our current destructive society. The qualities of scarcity or abundance are part of our minds and thereby of our economy.²⁵⁵

5.3.3 Gratitude and reciprocity as alternative

Kimmerer proposes cultivating gratitude towards nature and everything we receive from it as starting point to fully recognize its abundance.²⁵⁶ Practicing gratitude makes us more aware of the magnitude of nature’s gifts. It creates a feeling of fullness, which enables us to oppose the economic structures that are based on a feeling of emptiness.²⁵⁷ Gratitude can be expressed and strengthened through stories, rituals, music, scientific research, and through interacting with non-human beings with love and compassion. A change in culture is needed in which we are no longer only thankful to humans who feed, protect, and accompany us but also to all non-humans who are as essential for our survival.²⁵⁸ Kimmerer’s view is informed by the traditions and holistic worldview of the indigenous Potawatomi Nation community that she is part of.

Kimmerer, furthermore, pleads for moving beyond just showing gratitude towards fulfilling our responsibility to nature. According to her, we should recommit to a relationship of reciprocity with nature. This means that we should strive to sustain nature, by supporting and protecting natural processes, just as nature sustains us.²⁵⁹ This involves ecological restoration, small-scale gardening, resistance against the further destruction of our environment, and

²⁵³ Hickel, 173-74.

²⁵⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 150, iBooks.

²⁵⁵ Kimmerer, 483.

²⁵⁶ Kimmerer, 483.

²⁵⁷ Kimmerer, 150.

²⁵⁸ Kimmerer, “Returning the Gift,” 19-20.

²⁵⁹ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 491.

acting and consuming in conscious ways.²⁶⁰ Hickel also advocates for recovering our relationship of reciprocity with nature that, according to him, has been disturbed since we started to turn natural things into commodities as much as possible.²⁶¹ This reciprocity can, for example, involve regenerative farming, forestry, and fishing methods.²⁶²

This last proposed pathway of transforming our inner being involves leaving behind our feeling of lack and scarcity, that influence our (first-order) thinking process, by replacing it with a feeling of abundance. This feeling of abundance could be cultivated by practicing gratitude. Ideally, this transformation enables us to re-enter our relationship of reciprocity with nature. A switch to an ideology of abundance would also add to more gentleness towards others, since it would change our perception from being in constant competition for scarce goods with them towards happily sharing with them the things that are available to us more than we need to survive. This change in perception would also make us act differently, since our perceptions shapes the way in which we first-order monitor.

5.4 Bringing the proposed transformations into practice

An important question is how these proposed pathways can reach a wide public and motivate different groups of persons to engage in processes of self-transformation.

According to De Geus, our current institutions need to focus on actualizing the necessary ideological and cultural changes in our thinking and our acting: all kinds of societal organisations, political parties, and governments on each level need to encourage ecological sustainable ways of living.²⁶³ This is a proposal for a top-down approach, as part of which the inspiration for self-transformations could come from the already existing institutions.

These institutions could implement policies to encourage transformations in the inner being that cover different fields of society. Education is one of the fields that could play a key role in inspiring changes in the inner being.²⁶⁴ David Orr advocates for introducing environmental education for students to achieve ecological literacy. This entails teaching students the necessary cognitive and practical skills to face the challenges that come with the complex ecological crisis.²⁶⁵ The goal of this type of education is to change the way in which the educated lead their lives.²⁶⁶ According to Orr, environmental education should be participatory, interdisciplinary, and based on experiences. It should be far-reaching and diverse, not limited to a specific field or discipline.²⁶⁷ Ecological literacy involves being aware

²⁶⁰ Kimmerer, "Returning the Gift," 23-24.

²⁶¹ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 17-79.

²⁶² Hickel, 239-244.

²⁶³ De Geus, *Filosofie van de Eenvoud*, 317.

²⁶⁴ David W. Orr, "Environmental Education and Ecological Literacy: Knowing, Caring, and Practical Competence," *The Education Digest* 55, no. 9 (May 1990): 49-53.

²⁶⁵ Orr, "Educating for the Environment," 43-46.

²⁶⁶ Orr, "Ecological Literacy," 49-53.

²⁶⁷ Orr, "Ecological Literacy," 50.

of our interconnectedness with all living beings. It involves understanding that our wellbeing and survival depend entirely on the way we interact with nature now and in the future.²⁶⁸

Motivating students to engage in the pathway towards interconnectedness, is therefore an essential part of the environmental education that Orr suggest. Subsequently, motivating students to engage in the other two proposed pathways can also be seen as necessary for encouraging the students to modify their lifestyle. All three proposed pathways of transformations could thus play a role within environmental education. Offering this type of education through schools and courses could be a way to inspire people of all ages to engage in the proposed self-transformations.

Furthermore, changing the imaginary of the wider public could happen through cultural institutions by means of art, films, theatre, and religious practices.²⁶⁹ Latour and Stengers propose this approach to engage people emotionally and spiritually with the situation that we find ourselves in. They view this kind of engagement as a necessary addition to the cognitive engagement that results from learning scientific findings. Only a combination of these types of engagement will move people into action.²⁷⁰ Kimmerer suggests cultural practices, such as music and storytelling, as methods to cultivate feelings of gratitude towards nature and her gifts. This adds to our realisation of the abundance we find ourselves in and thereby to the self-transformation of the third proposed pathway.²⁷¹ The content of these practices could be extended to cultivate the other types of proposed transformations as well. Through works of art, storytelling, and religious practice the proposed paths of transformations and the necessity to engage in them can be communicated to a diverse public in different, affecting ways.

Additionally, an important step could be limiting or altogether banning advertising. This is often proposed as a policy within the degrowth movement.^{272 273 274} Hickel writes that advertising is psychologically manipulating people to consume more than they need in increasingly aggressive and more devious ways.²⁷⁵ Limiting advertisement could help to free our thinking from the constant desire to consume, decrease over-consumption, and open up a space for decision making, reflection, and creative thinking that is increasingly free from market-influences.^{276 277}

²⁶⁸ Orr, 51-52.

²⁶⁹ Manschot, *Blijf de Aarde Trouw*, 169-71.

²⁷⁰ Manschot, 169-71.

²⁷¹ Kimmerer, "Returning the Gift," 20.

²⁷² Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 142.

²⁷³ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 184-187.

²⁷⁴ Jason Hickel himself also recommended banning advertisement as a tool to specifically create changes in the inner being (in a conversation on the topic after his talk in *Viernulvier* in Ghent).

²⁷⁵ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 184-187.

²⁷⁶ Hickel, 184-187.

²⁷⁷ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 142.

According to Hickel, this new space can be used for deepening our knowledge in ways that enlarge our social and political involvement and strengthen our intrinsic values.²⁷⁸ Limiting advertising can, therefore, open up and entrance for hearing about and engaging with different types of self-transformation in our inner being.

Next to the top-down approach, that appoints institutions as the main drivers in encouraging processes of self-transformation, a bottom-up approach that views (groups of) individuals as the main drivers is also possible. Local grass-root initiatives that practice the degrowth ideal are, for example, cooperatives and ecovillages.²⁷⁹ If one or several of the proposed pathways are already followed by the members of these initiatives, this could inspire actors that are in contact with them to also engage in some degree of self-transformation.

In section 6.1 it is argued that the practice of ecovillages can be seen as an example of grass-root initiatives in which all of the proposed transformations have to some extent taken place. Since ecovillages often influence and inspire their surroundings, they could play a role in engaging an increasing number of people in self-transformation processes.²⁸⁰

Section 6.2 proposes a combination of a top-down and a bottom-up approach when drafting an explorative recommendation for the Bloemekenswijk neighbourhood in Ghent.

The abovementioned ways to bring the three proposed self-transformation pathways into practice constitute only a small selection of the possibilities and function mainly as an illustration. Further research needs to be carried out to find out what the exact outlines of institution or citizen-led processes of encouraging transformations in the inner beings of people could look like.

5.5 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, the pathways that were proposed in chapter 4 are elaborated and deepened with insights from scholars that work within degrowth, critical realism, or other relevant fields. Various interlinked theories are combined in order to propose concrete paths that transformations on the fourth plane could follow. The goal of this systematization is to gain insight in the different types of transformations in a person's inner being that could take place in the proposed process of self-transformation.

²⁷⁸ Hickel, *Minder is Meer*, 184-187.

²⁷⁹ Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 146.

²⁸⁰ Kosha Anja Joubert and Leila Dregger, *Ökodörfer Weltweit: Lokale Lösungen für Globale Probleme* (Saarbrücken: Neue Erde GmbH, 2015), 22.

Chapter 6: Self-transformation in practice: changes in the inner being of eco-villagers and Bloemekenswijk inhabitants

In the previous chapters, the proposed transformations on the plane of inner have mostly been explained in a theoretical sense. To come to a more complete understanding of what these transformations would entail, it can be useful to elaborate with contemporary examples on the ways in which they are brought and could further be brought into practice. Therefore, this chapter functions as an illustration of what transformations on the plane of inner being could look like in practice. Degrowth literature often names ecovillages as an example of degrowth ideology in action.^{281 282} Therefore, a case study of the extent to which the proposed transformations appear to have taken place in ecovillages is carried out. The case study starts by giving a short overview of the outlines of the ecovillage-movement. This forms a foundation for a investigation into the way in which transformations within the inner being are part of the ideology and practice of ecovillages.

In the second part of this chapter, insights from the case study and from previous chapters are used to draft a recommendation for city renewal in the Bloemekenswijk. The city renewal project that the recommendation is part of, is first introduced in order to set the background.

6.1 Transformations on the plane of inner being in ecovillages

6.1.1 Why study ecovillages?

Ecovillages can be seen as an example of (mini-)societies where high levels of human wellbeing are reached without economic growth. The term refers to places either inside or outside of cities, in which a group of people practice communal living in an (often radically) sustainable way. The central aim is to increase the quality of life, while protecting and regenerating the surrounding nature.²⁸³ Within ecovillages an environmental and a social dimension are combined.²⁸⁴ Ecovillages create the possibility to enjoy a high social and cultural quality of life while living in harmony with one's surroundings and with the planetary boundaries.²⁸⁵ They do this by creating a community that is completely (or to some degree) independent from larger society. Internal decisions are usually made via self-organised direct democracy.²⁸⁶ Within this community they voluntarily chose simple, non-materialistic lifestyles. Ecovillagers aim to fulfil their own basic needs and to be self-sustaining to a high degree.²⁸⁷ Often organised by work-sharing principles, they produce food by small-scale

²⁸¹ Cattaneo, "Eco-communities," 165-68.

²⁸² Van der Slycken, "Ontgroeien," 146.

²⁸³ Joubert and Dregger, *Ökodörfer Weltweit*, 22.

²⁸⁴ Cattaneo, "Eco-communities," 166.

²⁸⁵ Joubert and Dregger, *Ökodörfer Weltweit*, 22.

²⁸⁶ Cattaneo, "Eco-communities," 165-68.

²⁸⁷ Joubert and Dregger, *Ökodörfer Weltweit*, 6-11.

organic farming and permaculture, build housing by self-construction, create utensils and clothing by workshop and handicraft production, and supply themselves with energy by generating renewable sources.²⁸⁸

Within degrowth literature, ecovillages are often named as examples of degrowth in practice.²⁸⁹ According to a studies, mapping the policies that were proposed in a wide range of degrowth literature, ecovillages are among the most frequently named policy instrument to achieve degrowth goals.²⁹⁰ Trainer points out that within ecovillages his idea of adopting a radically simpler lifestyle is actualized.²⁹¹ Degrowth scholar and ecovillage-resident Claudio Cattaneo, states that ecovillages show us how the theory of degrowth could be translated into action.²⁹² For these reasons, ecovillages form a relevant site for a case study on self-transformations towards degrowth in action.

Due to their limited size, the direct influence of ecovillages on mainstream society remains limited. Nevertheless, they can play an important inspirational role and thus increase their impact. Trainer writes that ecovillages fulfil the role of illustrating what the necessary changes in both ideas and values could look like in practice. By doing this, ecovillages educate the wider public about these transformations and the way they can take place.²⁹³ Furthermore, ecovillages function as a space for the trial of new ways of organising social processes, agriculture, and an economy. They demonstrate that living in a truly sustainable way is possible and inspire their direct and indirect surroundings with this.²⁹⁴ According to Litfin, who researched 14 different ecovillages, these villages can teach wider society lessons ‘at every scale of human existence’.²⁹⁵ They create insights into the nature of the challenges that arise when trying to live sustainably. From studying the way in which successful ecovillages function, it becomes clear that living more sustainably is in the first place a social and economic challenge instead of a mainly technological one, as it is often presented in the current societal debate.²⁹⁶

The ecovillage movement is diverse: different ways of communal living are practiced in each of them. The Global Ecovillage Network (hereafter: GEN) is an organisation that is connecting a diverse group of eco-communities that have a shared goal of increasing the quality of the life while also cutting back on resource use.²⁹⁷ Text written by GEN on the shared ideology of

²⁸⁸ Cattaneo, “Eco-communities,” 165-68.

²⁸⁹ Cattaneo, 165-68.

²⁹⁰ Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme, “Degrowth Policy Proposals,” 8.

²⁹¹ Trainer, “De-Growth: Some Suggestions,” 4.

²⁹² Cattaneo, “Eco-communities,” 167.

²⁹³ Trainer, “De-Growth: Some Suggestions,” 6.

²⁹⁴ Joubert and Dregger, *Ökodörfer Weltweit*, 22.

²⁹⁵ Karen T. Litfin, *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 187.

²⁹⁶ Peadar Kirby, “Cloughjordan Ecovillage: Modelling the Transition to a Low-Carbon Society,” in *Transitioning to a Post-Carbon Society: Degrowth, Austerity and Wellbeing*, eds. Ernest Garcia, Mercedes Martinez-Iglesias, and Peadar Kirby (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2017), 203.

²⁹⁷ Joubert and Dregger, *Ökodörfer Weltweit*, 21.

all these different communities is investigated in the next section, in order to find out what role transformations in the inner being fulfil within the ecovillages that are part of this network. Studying the text written by GEN as a main source for the case study causes ecovillages that are not part of this network to be under represented. Nonetheless, it could still provide a fairly representative picture of the movement, since GEN includes a group of 10.000 highly versatile eco-communities and related projects worldwide.²⁹⁸

In summary, ecovillages appear to be a very concrete realisation of the degrowth ideal. Despite the fact that they are often small and only inhabit limited amounts of people, they have a large transformational potential since they inspire their direct and indirect surroundings by demonstrating that different, environment-friendly ways of living are possible. This makes them an interesting object of study for the purpose of the underlying research. Since this is only a limited case study, no universal answers can be drawn from it. Hopefully it will, however, create a clearer imagine of what the pathways of self-transformation, that are proposed by this research, could look like in practice.

Figure 4

The Ecovillage-Design-Mandala describes sustainable development of ecovillages in four dimensions;

source: Global Ecovillage Network, <https://ecovillage.org/solution/the-5-dimensions-of-sustainability/mandala2-web-jpg/>, accessed May 24, 2023.



²⁹⁸ Global Ecovillage Network, “Who is the Global Ecovillage Network?,” accessed August 6, 2023. <https://ecovillage.org/ecovillages/map-of-regeneration/>.

6.1.2 The pathways of self-transformation in ecovillages

GEN developed the 'Ecovillage-Design-Mandala', a holistic map that provides insights into the objectives that form the basis of the sustainable design and development of ecovillages. An image of this mandala can be found above in figure 4. The mandala consists of a social, an economic, an ecological, and a worldview dimension. In each of these dimensions five objectives are named that together form the shared objectives of ecovillages that are part of GEN.²⁹⁹

'Transformations of consciousness' is named as one of the objectives within the worldview section of the mandala. This is directly linked to the idea of transforming the inner being, since transforming one's consciousness can be seen as transforming the way in which one is aware of the world and one's position in the world. This could be interpreted as transforming the way in which one perceives the world and one's role or function in it. This corresponds to changes on Bhaskar's fourth plane since it would probably entail altering one's values, priorities, and the way in which one perceives oneself. Transformation in the inner being can therefore be seen as part of the objectives of GEN.

GEN does not elaborate on whether these transformations would have to occur individually or on the group level. Nonetheless, a certain degree of self-transformation would be necessary for transforming one's consciousness, since being consciousness, arguably, can be defined as something that occurs within oneself.

When interviewed, ecovillagers often state that they have experienced a lot of personal growth while living in their ecovillage that made them increasingly embrace the ideal of local and conscious consumption.³⁰⁰ According to Kirby, this 'inner transformation' can be construed as an essential dimension of sustainable living.³⁰¹ The fact that ecovillagers often experience internal transformations, as a result of which they are further embodying the degrowth ideals, points to the idea that transformations of the inner being are also part of the practice of ecovillages.

Following the previous argument, it can be concluded that self-transformations in the inner being in general are part of the ideology and practice of ecovillages. As a next step, this case-study investigates, more specifically, to what extent the three pathways of self-transformation that were proposed seem to be part of the ecovillage movement.

The first proposed transformation, from egocentrism towards interconnectedness, can be directly linked to a pair of key objectives named in the worldview section of the Ecovillage-Design-Mandala: 'Holistic worldview' and 'Reconnecting with nature'. Embracing an holistic

²⁹⁹ Joubert and Dregger, *Ökodörfer Weltweit*, 8-11.

³⁰⁰ Litfin, "Ecovillages: Lessons," 149.

³⁰¹ Kirby, "Cloughjordan Ecovillage," 199.

worldview entails experiencing everything (including oneself) as interconnected. The aim of reconnecting with nature emphasises the importance of cultivating this feeling of interconnectedness specifically between oneself and nature. On the GEN-website, '[I]earn from nature and practice whole systems thinking' is named as another goal of GEN-ecovillages.³⁰² Next to this, GEN writes that a central ambition of ecovillages is to respect natural cycles when taking materials and food from nature. They strive to reintegrate humanity with nature and its beings and to, thereby, help humans experience 'their interdependence with systems and cycles of life.'³⁰³ All these objectives can be seen as corresponding to the first transformation pathway that involves creating a sense of connection with the world and all beings.

According to GEN's website, in most ecovillages activities in the form of celebrations and different creative practices are performed to encourage the ecovillagers to cultivate deep feelings of connection with each other and their planet.³⁰⁴ Furthermore, communal living is one of the most important elements of an ecovillage. Kirby writes that 'the dense web of interconnectedness that characterizes the relationships' is what creates the community-feeling in those villages.³⁰⁵ This web of interconnectedness can be interpreted as the practical result of experiencing oneness with a group of people.

The first transformation path seems to be very much present in GEN's ideology. It appears to be experienced and further cultivated in ecovillage practice.

The second proposed pathway of transformation, that from living in a mode of having towards living in a mode of being, is also visible within ecovillage ideology. Embracing low-impact lifestyles is named by GEN as an important goal for ecovillagers.³⁰⁶

Cattaneo writes that ecovillages 'develop practices of voluntary simplicity'.³⁰⁷ Ecovillagers aim to live simply and consume only as much as they really need. According to Litfin, anti-consumerism, local production, and self-sufficiency are important elements of ecovillage life. The 'quality of relationships' is prioritised over the quantity of the material things one possesses.³⁰⁸ To make the conscious choices to live in this way, can be considered as directly linked to a shift away from defining oneself by what one has, the second proposed transformation on the plane of inner being. Ecovillagers thus seem to embrace the transformation proposed as a second pathway and put it into practice in their villages.

³⁰² Global Ecovillage Network, "The Ecovillage Map of Regeneration," accessed August 9, 2023. <https://ecovillage.org/ecovillages/map-of-regeneration/>.

³⁰³ Global Ecovillage Network, "The Ecovillage Map of Regeneration."

³⁰⁴ Global Ecovillage Network, "The Ecovillage Map of Regeneration."

³⁰⁵ Kirby, "Cloughjordan Ecovillage," 198.

³⁰⁶ Global Ecovillage Network, "The Ecovillage Map of Regeneration."

³⁰⁷ Cattaneo, "Eco-communities," 167.

³⁰⁸ Litfin, "Ecovillages: Lessons," 24-81.

The third proposed pathway of transformation, that from scarcity to abundance, mostly becomes visible in ecovillages in the way economic practices are organised. GEN writes that an objective of ecovillages is 'to build economic practices and systems that contribute to sharing of resources.'³⁰⁹ According to Cattaneo, ecovillagers often practice sharing (material things) and common managing of land and resources.³¹⁰ Voluntarily sharing resources indicates that the realisation that there is enough for everyone has taken place. Providing people with this insight can be seen as a goal of the third pathway. This goal might have been reached, to a certain extent, with regard to the ecovillagers who embrace principles of sharing and communal ownership.

Furthermore, the idea of being in a relationship of reciprocity with nature and thereby protecting and restoring it that is incorporated in the third pathway is reflected in the ecological section of the Ecovillage-Design-Mandala in the objective 'Nature & urban regeneration [...]'. On their website GEN further elaborated on this by emphasising the importance of protecting and regenerating nature by increasing biodiversity, restoring ecosystems, and using regenerative agriculture methods when growing food.³¹¹ Therefore, the third transformation pathway also seems to play a role within the ecovillage-movement, albeit a slightly less explicit one.

In conclusion, engaging in transformations of the inner being appears to be an important component of the lives of ecovillagers. Each of the three proposed transformation paths can be said to be present to some extent in both the ideology and daily practice of ecovillages. The first two transformations in particular play a central role within the ecovillage discourse.

6.2 Recommendation for the Bloemekenswijk

6.2.1 Renewal of urban renewal

This dissertation was written as part of a master's dissertation project group that is part of the *Stadsacademie* Ghent. This project named 'renewal of urban renewal' aims to contribute to renewing the way in which urban renewal takes place. The project starts from the idea that new directions of urban renewal should provide solutions for urban issues related to the ecological and social crisis.³¹² This academic year, the project group specifically focussed on urban renewal in the Bloemekenswijk neighbourhood in Ghent. In an interdisciplinary group, made up of five master students and two professors, we aimed to gain insights on the key issues for urban renewal in this neighbourhood. We investigated the structure of this

³⁰⁹ Global Ecovillage Network, "The Ecovillage Map of Regeneration."

³¹⁰ Cattaneo, "Eco-communities," 165-68.

³¹¹ Global Ecovillage Network, "The Ecovillage Map of Regeneration."

³¹² "Vernieuwing van de Stadsvernieuwing," *Stadsacademie*, accessed August 14, 2023, <https://stadsacademie.be/traject/stadsvernieuwing/>.

neighbourhood, its main actors and organisations, and its major challenges. In the first place, these insights functioned as inspiration for the process of choosing and refining the individual master's dissertation topics. In the second place, the insights are incorporated into the modest contribution each student makes to the central issue 'urban renewal in the Bloemekenswijk', from the perspective of their dissertation. On the basis of all previous chapters of this dissertation, some recommendations for the neighbourhood 'Bloemekenswijk' in Ghent are done in the following section.

6.2.2 Recommendations for urban renewal in the Bloemekenswijk

Successful, future-proof urban renewal in industrialized countries arguably needs to have a strong focus on reducing the ecological footprint of the area while simultaneously preparing the area for changing weather conditions (often weather extremes) due to climate change. Neighbourhoods that struggle with social problems such as high poverty rates and social inequality would be well advised to implement solutions to these challenges in their move towards a more environmentally friendly and resilient urban area.

According to the website of the city of Ghent, relatively many people in the Bloemekenswijk neighbourhood live in social housing and a high percentage of residents are entitled to low-income financial benefits.³¹³ The neighbourhood can thus be seen as an area with high poverty rates. Therefore, it would be desirable for urban renewal in this neighbourhood to aim for a mode of renewal that improves its inhabitant's social situation while lowering their ecological footprint. Implementing the theory of degrowth and its objectives, in a manner tailored to the neighbourhood, could form this mode of renewal.

In order to bring degrowth into practice in the Bloemekenswijk, arguably, transformations on all the four planes of human action need to take place. According to critical realist theory, acts and thereby changes on the first three planes are dependent on changes on the fourth plane. 'Degrowing' the Bloemekenswijk could therefore start by transformations in the inner beings of its inhabitants. The three pathways of transformation that were proposed in earlier chapters could function as concrete paths along which these changes in the inner beings of the inhabitants could take place. The three pathways are (1) moving from egocentrism towards interconnectedness, (2) moving from living in the mode of having towards living in the mode of being, and (3) moving from perceiving one's position as one of scarcity towards perceiving it as one of abundance.

Encouraging the Bloemekenswijk inhabitants to engage in the self-transformations proposed by these pathways could happen in different ways, as were discussed in section 5.4. Both institutions and grass-root initiatives could fulfil the function of stimulating people to engage

³¹³ Stad Gent. "Bloemekenswijk." Accessed August 6, 2023. <https://ecovillage.org/ecovillages/map-of-regeneration/>.

in self-transform of their values and goals. Institution-led stimulation could take place through education, art and other cultural practices, and limiting advertisement. Eco-literacy among the inhabitants could be achieved by introducing courses in all levels of education on the current state of the planet, on the interdependence of all beings, on less materialistic ways of living, and on our responsibility to protect nature. Municipal subsidies could increase cultural events and art-making (such as theatre plays, works of art in public spaces, or a street festivals) that would aim to inspire neighbourhood residents to engage in transformations in their inner being. Finally, the municipality could take the very concrete measure of restricting or banning advertising in public spaces in the Bloemekenswijk.

The Bloemekenswijk has many associations and neighbourhood initiatives.³¹⁴ These could play a leading role in motivating inhabitants to self-transform. It is plausible that within these associations, people can inspire other group members, or even people who briefly interact with them to engage in self-transformation processes with them. Furthermore, these initiatives could organise activities and discussions that concern themselves with the necessary self-transformations to become able to act towards degrowth.

The above gives only a limited recommendation for bringing about transformations in the inner being of residents of the Bloemekenswijk neighbourhood. Further elaboration on the possible courses of action would be needed to create a more concrete recommendation that could be implemented in the neighbourhood.

6.4 Chapter conclusion

Based on the case study on ecovillages it can be argued that all three proposed pathways of self-transformation are to some extent present in ecovillage theory and practice. Ways to make these three pathways also present in an urban context such as the Bloemekenswijk neighbourhood in Ghent, are elaborated in the recommendation for this neighborhood.

³¹⁴ Stad Gent. "Bloemekenswijk."

Chapter 7: Discussion

This seventh chapter discusses several insights and remarks that have risen from previous sections. It starts by discussing some general reflections on self-transformation as elaborated in this dissertation. Secondly, some general remarks on the case study on ecovillages and the recommendation for city renewal in the Bloemekenswijk are made. Throughout the whole chapter recommendations for further research are made.

7.1 Reflections on self-transformation

As becomes clear from the previous chapters, a large and diverse group of philosophers, economists, anthropologists, and other scientists concern themselves with the changes in the worldview and values of persons that, according to these researchers, need to take place in order to combat climate change. Their findings are as diverse as their backgrounds, but nevertheless several common threads can be found in their collective body of work. Within this dissertation some of these common threads have been highlighted as part of the proposal of three concrete paths of transformation.

The division into these specific paths can be seen as limited since it is based on one possible interpretation of self-transformation, that of Buch-Hansen and Nesterova. Other divisions based on Buch-Hansen and Nesterova's listing or on different self-transformation theories, would be possible. This is illustrated by the fact that in the current division the paths are deeply interwoven. The theories that are discussed within each of the pathways are often inherently linked to the other paths. Kimmerer, for example, bases her argument for appreciating the abundance of earth's gift on a holistic worldview in which everything is interconnected. Another example is provided by the fact that voluntary simple living and sustainable hedonism, cultivate a culture in which non-material sources of satisfaction become more central, and thereby, arguably, not only advocate for living more in a state of being but additionally for changing the feeling of always needing more (things) into a feeling of having more than enough: abundance. The created 'list of pathways' is, therefore, not meant to be final or exhaustive. It is merely meant as one possible way to group the necessary transformations and shape them into concrete paths to follow.

An important question that arises is in what way people are responsible for engaging in the described self-transformation. The fact that the necessary transformations are self-transformations does not mean that the responsibility for making these changes happen is placed on individuals alone. The call to focus more on self-transformation within the both the degrowth movement and the overall project of countering climate destruction, is not meant as a call to focus more on individual responsibility when proposing possible solutions to the crises. Instead it is meant as a call to be more considerate of the fact that socio-political shifts are caused by people's (collective) actions, and that people's actions are in turn influenced by

how they view the world. Thereby it is a call to shift the 'starting point' for empowering people to change society to engaging them in self-transformation processes.

An accompanying question would be whether some groups, for example the super-rich, politicians, or academics, are more responsible for engaging in the described self-transformation than others. Arguably those who have the greatest influence on the functioning of society, also have the greatest responsibility for changing their own behaviour and thereby their own inner being. Therefore, it is more urgent that this group engages in processes of self-transformation.

Another difficult issue is that of the origin of the incentive for self-transformation. When the transformations are viewed as something that people can be inspired to engage in by their surroundings, the question remains where the incentive comes from that changes the surroundings into promoting self-transformation. Where would the stimulus to actually change the policies, culture, or goals in ways that promote transformations in the inner beings of people originate from? After all, the people forming the institutions or movements are just as much formed by the social structures as all others.

It follows from critical realist theory and from the TMSA in particular that the institutions that, in accordance with section 5.4 could stimulate a growing amount of people to self-transform, are pre-existing institutions with certain structures. These structures need to be transformed by the actions of humans to achieve the necessary shift in focus towards encouraging the necessary transformations in the inner being of persons. This creates a complicated situation in which the first incentive to self-transform has to develop inside the pre-existing structures somehow. Alternatively, it could be possible that the incentive to transform towards the proposed worldview has always been present within humanity, since it largely overlaps with indigenous worldviews and thereby find its roots in ancient knowledge. Further investigation into critical realist theory would be necessary to fully answer the question of the possible origination of the incentive for self-transformation. However, the first incentive can be viewed as currently existing when considering the quantity of theories on the topic.

7.2 Remarks on the case study and recommendation

To make more informed statements on the role played by the three proposed paths of self-transformation and self-transformation in general, a more comprehensive study of both the underlying theory and the resulting practice in different ecovillages would need to be done. Nevertheless, the current case study can be seen as sufficient to show that the three self-transformation paths play a role, at least to some extent, within the eco-village movement.

In order to make a more relevant recommendation for the Bloemekenswijk, in which self-transformations are central, a much deeper understanding of the current situation in the neighbourhood would be necessary.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

To answer the central question *which types of transformations in our inner being are necessary in order to bring degrowth into practice?* three possible types of transformations are identified in this dissertation. These three types are proposed as three concrete pathways to follow to enable oneself to act towards bringing degrowth into practice: (1) moving from egocentrism towards interconnectedness, (2) moving from living in the mode of having towards living in the mode of being, and (3) moving from perceiving one's position as one of scarcity towards perceiving it as one of abundance. This dissertation argues that all of these three pathways would need to be followed in order to bring our inner being in accordance with degrowth. The division into these three specific pathways can be seen as limited and inconclusive, but it nevertheless gives an insight into different types of transformation that can be distinguished among proposals for transformations in the worldview and values of people. From the case study on ecovillages it becomes clear that living in accordance with these pathways is already practiced by ecovillagers, this can form an inspiration for others to engage in these transformations as well.

Overall, it can be concluded that changes in our worldview are inevitable if we are to stand a chance of stopping the destruction of our environment. Self-transformations of our worldview and values could be essential to free ourselves from the growth imperative and move towards a society in which human flourishing is central and the planetary boundaries are no longer exceeded. Therefore, the degrowth movement could benefit from giving self-transformation a more central place in its theory.

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