

Dantean Virtue Ethics as a Basis for Sustainable Peace

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the nature of peace and its importance as a foundation for a safe, secure society where individuals and nations can live together and flourish. It argues that peace is urgently needed for achieving sustainability as violent conflicts and wars are existential threats to our own survival as a species as well as to the planet. By tracing the development of moral law and the capital virtues and vices from ancient Greek and early Christian philosophy and drawing on the *Divine Comedy* it shows how moral failure leads to conflict and violence and how Dante's model of Purgatory can function as a roadmap to peace through the cultivation of virtue. It argues that peace on a global scale can only be achieved through systemic moral transformation and not through purely political or economic means. It suggests prioritizing SDG-16 on peace to the first goal, reflecting its vital role in facilitating the other goals; and that SDG-4 on education be expanded to give greater emphasis on morality and virtue ethics.

Keywords: morality, virtue ethics, sustainable development, peace, the Divine Comedy, moral philosophy.

1. Introduction

Sustainability pertains to the long-term viability of humanity on Earth and encompasses not only the ability of our planet and its ecosystems to provide the resources and processes necessary for human survival and well-being, but also the ability of human beings to coexist peacefully and build societies that integrate harmoniously with the environment (Diaz et al., 2019; Dirzo et al., 2022; Meadows, 1972; Whitmore, 2024a). It is widely recognised today that conflict between nations can lead to catastrophic scenarios that threaten all life on Earth (Ahmed et al., 2024), making the need for peace particularly urgent (BAS 2025).

Outbreaks of violence and war not only endanger the future of humanity but also jeopardize the health and wellbeing of the planet (Pauling, 1990; Robinson, 1979). Ecosystems, biodiversity and species populations are at risk from both the immediate and long-term effects of violent conflicts, in addition to other threats such as overexploitation and pollution (Ceballos et al., 2010; Magurran et al., 2010; Trainer, 1997). The testing and use of nuclear and biological weapons exacerbate this threat, seriously jeopardizing the foundations of biological life, including the integrity of DNA and genetic replication (Glasstone, 2013).

Peace is a state of tranquillity and quietness, often characterized by the absence of conflict, violence and disturbance (Galtung, 1969; Gawerc, 2006). It can refer to a condition of personal inner calm as well as the broader social or political condition of communities and nations that coexist without hostility or war. Peace encompasses concepts such as justice, equity and respect for human rights, as these contribute to a stable and harmonious society. Many cultures, philosophies and systems of faith emphasize the importance of peace as a foundation for human wellbeing, healthy relationships and spiritual growth.

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The human world is a reflection of the inner life and moral condition of individuals. Whether it is violent or peaceful reflects how we think, how we feel and how the interplay between emotions and the rational mind influences our actions. In the fields of moral philosophy and virtue ethics, largely built upon the works of Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, moral consciousness is both inherent and evolving as humans question their actions and take responsibility for them. Based on this, a peaceful and sustainable world can only be achieved through the moral development of humanity.

Instead of placing the blame for conflict and violence solely on external factors or political disputes, it is necessary to consider the moral dynamics that drive human behavior. When individuals are in conflict they strike out at others, but when nations come into conflict, they wage war; and just as individuals can engage in moral improvement and seek a peaceful path, so must nations if humanity is to have a future.

Morality is indicated in *Limits to Growth* as underpinning sustainability (Meadows et al., 1972): 'The world system is simply not ample enough nor generous enough to accommodate much longer such egocentric and conflictive behaviour by its inhabitants'. Both egocentrism and conflictive behaviour are moral issues. As members of the human family, each individual bears a vital responsibility to respect the moral principles that underpin peaceful coexistence and sustainable progress (Whitmore, 2024b).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) list peace as Goal 16, implying that it is a by-product of the successful accomplishment of the first 15 goals. While this can be seen as a logical progression, it assumes that the earlier goals can be achieved without first establishing peace, which is questionable since violent conflict obstructs their fulfilment. Additionally, placing peace at the end of the list may result in an unacceptably long delay in achieving it, potentially too late to avert catastrophe. According to Martin Luther King, 'Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal'.

Recent events highlight these concerns, particularly in the Middle East, North Africa, Sudan and Ukraine. 2024 was the deadliest year on record for humanitarian aid workers with 281 killed globally (UN, 2024a), 284 killed in Gaza in the last 18 months (UN, 2024b), and aid supplies consistently prevented from reaching children and populations in need across the globe (UNSC, 2024). This underscores that without the cessation of violence, the work of organizations, such as the UN and other charity and local community endeavors, to bring the SDGs into fruition will continue to experience resistance and tragic setbacks.

Peaceful coexistence, sustainable development and social harmony are reliant not only on laws and institutions, but also on the moral development of individuals. John Adams the second president of the U.S. expressed similar sentiments in 1798 when he addressed the Massachusetts militia about the importance of personal responsibility and ethical commitment: 'Our constitution was made only for a moral people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other' (Adams, 1798).

This paper explores the connections between morality and peace. By drawing on ideas of morality from classical Greek and early Christian philosophy as well as the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri, it will show how moral vices lead to conflict and violence, while moral virtues empower individuals to think and act peacefully and responsibly affirming life and building secure, safe, sustainable societies.

2. Peace as a necessary foundation for sustainable development

It is widely acknowledged that a state of peace creates the most favorable conditions for both individual and societal flourishing, as well as the wellbeing of the biosphere (e.g. Galtung, 1996). Therefore, peace is not only essential for the sustainability of humanity on Earth but is also critical for its evolution. Among the three pillars of sustainable development—social, economic and environmental—peace is a prerequisite for success in each. Simultaneously, advancements in these areas enhance security, stability and peace, creating a positive feedback loop that benefits all aspects of society and the environment (Ghimire, 2023; Boyer et al., 2016).

History shows that humanity has made its most extraordinary achievements—culturally, philosophically, scientifically and artistically—during times of peace. When societies are free from conflict, individuals and communities can concentrate on innovation, learning, reflective thinking, creativity, and cooperation.

The Golden Age of Athens (c. 480-404 BC), for example, was a recognised time of peace (Kurt et al., 2009). During this time philosophers such as Socrates and Plato laid the groundwork for Western philosophy and ethics; playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides developed genres of morality and tragedy; architectural marvels such as the Parthenon and the temple of Apollo were built; the political system of democracy was created; Euclid and Archimedes made significant contributions to mathematics and science; and Herodotus compiled accounts of historical events, peoples and cultures. The Renaissance in Europe (c. 1300-1600) was also a time of relative peace that witnessed an explosion of creativity, innovation and new insights. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo produced stunning works of art, writers like Boccaccio and Shakespeare transformed literature, and scientific advancements made by scholars including Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler laid the groundwork for modern science (Crombie, 1980).

In times of conflict and war, things are different. Fear and unrest prevent the settlement and security necessary for quiet reflection and meditation, collaboration and longer-term projects, while centres of study and records can be destroyed resulting in loss of written knowledge. Acts of violence create ripples that extend far beyond immediate victims, impacting ecosystems and future generations (Fiala, 2015). While narratives tend to emphasize human casualties, damage to eco-systems and animals are often overlooked. The use of Agent Orange in Vietnam (My et al., 2021) and depleted uranium during the Gulf War (Fathi et al., 2013) highlight the devastation of ecosystems and corruption of the natural gene pool. Vast tracks of land in Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan still remain closed due to radioactive contamination and unexploded ordnance from these wars (Meaza et al., 2024).

While historical claims have suggested that war can somehow be economically beneficial (von Clausewitz, 2021; Lewin, 2008), extensive data indicates that war only has detrimental effects on economies (Thies et al., 2020; Federle et al., 2024; Angell 2015), and the assertion that wars increase innovation has been shown to be false (Brunk et al., 1981). No rationalization can justify the devastation wrought by war; especially when societal transformation can be achieved peacefully through better management (Galtung, 1996). This is particularly important to appreciate in the context of modern warfare, where nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons cause catastrophic and enduring damage to both the environment and humanity (Brehm et al., 2013; Pauling, 1961; Pauling, 1982).

The testing and use of nuclear weapons inflict unimaginable devastation on ecosystems, rendering many sites uninhabitable for centuries due to radioactive poisoning. Notable examples include the Marshall Islands, central Nevada, Semipalatinsk, Novaya Zemlya, Algerian Sahara and Maralinga. Radioactive dust from these regions spreads to neighboring areas and around the globe. The Sahara dust that frequently blows across Europe and that turned large areas of France orange in March 2021 was found to contain radioactive particles produced by the Gerboise Bleue nuclear test carried out by the French military in Algeria in February 1960 (Papastefanou et al., 2001).

The most powerful nuclear weapon ever tested was the Tsar Bomba, produced by the USSR during the cold war (Dabrowski, 2021). With a blast yield equal to 50 Mt of TNT, it was over 3,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. While nuclear weapons have been reduced in size over the last 60 years to simplify deployment and localize effects, an estimated 12,000 nuclear warheads still exist in the world (FAS 2024). Furthermore, modern missiles such as the Oreshnik hypersonic missile can be armed with multiple conventional or nuclear warheads (Oreshnik 2024), while one single SR28-Sarmat missile carrying 15 thermonuclear warheads could decimate a small country like the UK.

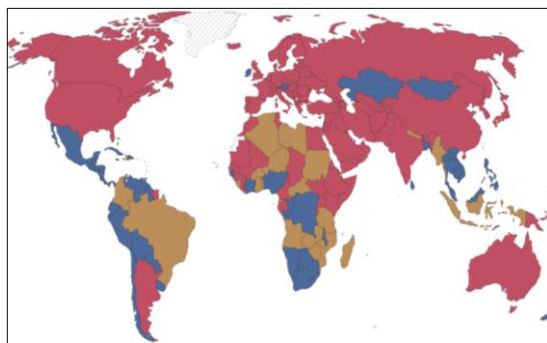


Figure 1. Country position on the TPNW with red unsigned, blue agreed and brown signed (ICAN 2024).

Figure 1 shows the positions of nations with regards to the 2023 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW 2017; ICAN 2024). The Global South is leading the way but none of the nine states known to possess nuclear weapons (the US, Russia, China, France, the UK, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea) are parties to the treaty. This shows that, while willingness exists in many nations to eliminate nuclear weapons, the sentiments are very different in those that actually possess them.

War is the moral breakdown of nations where the intelligence, moral character and humanity of the people combined with their political leadership has failed to secure peace and stability. While change is inevitable and conflicts between different groups can become intense, they do not necessarily need to escalate into violence or war. Many philosophers have argued that mankind is failing to mature spiritually, arresting at some early age and thereafter growing older but not wiser (e.g. Steiner, 1917). Consequently, political leaders too-often lack the understanding, compassion and moral strength to effectively defend the nation from the forces within it that drive for war and to build and maintain peaceful relations with other nations.

This suggests very strongly that nuclear disarmament and the elimination of other weapons of mass destruction can only come out from a fundamental shift in our collective consciousness, that firmly rejects violence and war, and that views other nations and individuals with respect and a sense of kinship, and that produces political leaders with the moral strength and integrity to defend the peace and protect the people. The moral development of mankind is an imperative if we are to develop, grow, evolve, make true progress and live peacefully and sustainably on Earth.

While countless studies link global warming to carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions, the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change does not mandate accounting for military emissions. This Military Emissions Gap results in insufficient data to accurately track or regulate emissions from military activities. Studies estimate that 'the projected emissions from the first 60 days of the Israel-Gaza war were greater than the annual emissions of 20 individual countries and territories' (Neimark et al., 2024), that 77 Mt of CO₂e were produced in the Ukraine war during an 18-month period (Bun et al., 2024), and that the global military carbon footprint accounts for approximately 5.5% of the total global emissions (Parkinson et al., 2022).

High-tech facilities and infrastructure are particularly vulnerable during times of conflict and unrest as illustrated by the sabotage of the Nord Stream II pipeline, recent missile and drone attacks on the Zaporizhzhia and Chernobyl nuclear power plants, and the failing of the Cinia C-Lion1 and Estlink2 submarine cables. Global communications cables, geo-positioning satellites, high power electricity cables, power stations, server farms and data centres are all highly vulnerable to attack and become weak links in times of unrest; the same is true of engineering marvels such as the Crimean and Huangmaohai Bridges and the 828 m high Burj Khalifa.

The Nord Stream II catastrophe released an estimated 115 kt of natural gas into the atmosphere, equivalent to about 15 Mt of CO₂ (Sanderson et al., 2023). The explosion, equal to 500 kg of TNT, generated a shock wave that harmed marine animals up to 20 km away. Adding to the catastrophe, the explosion occurred in the Bornholm Basin, a toxic waste dump site, and released an estimated 250 kt of sediments into the sea spreading lead and hazardous chemicals like tributyltin, poisoning fish populations and other marine life.

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) website, the number of violent conflicts worldwide has doubled in the past five years and exceeded 200,000 in 2024. This means that global tensions are escalating, and it is more urgent than ever right now to emphasize peace in geopolitical circumstances and dealings and to work together to establish pathways to long-term sustainable peace and cooperation.

While the UN remains a valuable forum for international dialogue, cooperation and settlement of disputes, many criticize the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council as rendering it biased, outdated and ineffective (UNSC, 2024b). Since the last 25 years social media has emerged as a powerful platform for global discourse, reflecting worldwide sentiment overwhelmingly against violence and war (Gawerc, 2015; Lanz et al., 2021). This collective conscience has the potential to realign political sentiment and foster accountability by exposing corruption and holding individuals to account.

Critics often blame the military-industrial complex, international finance, or specific ideologies for war (Butler, 2003; Gouliamos, 2013; Perkins, 2023). However, this paper argues that the problem is rooted more deeply in the ethical and moral considerations that underlie our ideals of prosperity and success, and how we, as human beings, think about and treat other human beings. The UN's shift from national security to human security (UN, 2024c) suggests a fundamental reframing of how we think about these things, making it clear that true security and peace cannot exist where human rights are compromised, encouraging us to reflect upon our values, and seek out a moral foundation for a more equitable and peaceful world.

3. A philosophical and moral basis for peace

When a person observes a butterfly, they feel a profound sense of wonder at its beauty, and awe at the mystery of its transformation from a caterpillar. Conversely, if the butterfly becomes trapped in a spider's web, it elicits pangs of sadness and concern in the observer. The ability to experience such feelings as awe and wonder, as well as empathy and compassion for almost all living things, captures the essence of what it means to be human. Throughout history, philosophers have explored the meaning of these characteristics and qualities and how they inform and shape our moral judgements.

From these studies, an understanding of moral law has emerged, consisting of fundamental principles that represent our true humanity and are broadly recognized as forming the foundation of human life, allowing individuals to coexist peacefully, and for society to be secure and to flourish. These principles include respect for life, fairness and justice, honesty and integrity, beneficence, non-maleficence, responsibility and accountability, mercy, forgiveness, gratitude, open-mindedness, solidarity and cooperation, altruism, pursuit of knowledge and understanding, pursuit of happiness and fulfillment, and sustainability (Kant, 2005; Brightman, 2010; Bergson, 2024).

The evolution of moral consciousness underwent a dramatic advancement through ancient Greek philosophy (Blackburn, 2016; Mautner, 2005). According to Heraclitus (c. 540-480 BC) the universe is governed by a divine and rational order that he termed Logos that imbues everything with inherent nature, reason and purpose. Socrates (469-399 BC) promoted the value of questioning, reflection, reasoning and critical thinking as ways to understand the universe and man's place in it so that man could live a virtuous life. Plato (428-348 BC) built upon this idea stating that the underlying rationality of the universe produces a moral order that acts always toward the good. According to Aristotle (384-322 BC), humans align themselves with this rational order through the development of moral virtues which then lead to eudaimonia, or flourishing, the ultimate goal of human life, so that 'The good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue' (Aristotle, 2020).

Christianity developed these ideas further (Placher et al., 2013), asserting that Logos is God (John 1:1), and that Jesus Christ represents the incarnation of Logos—God's idea of how man should be. By living in accordance with the teachings and example of Jesus mankind can live and grow peacefully and harmoniously with universal order. But Christianity goes further, claiming that the universe is not a cold, mechanistic realm governed solely by abstract principles, but is an ongoing creation, fashioned by a God whose essence is love. Humanity finds peace and spiritual fulfillment not merely by aligning with a cosmic order, but through a personal relationship with God.

Early Christian philosophers Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) and Gregory the Great (540–604) (Gregory, 2015) built upon Aristotle's moral virtues and vices to include these spiritual insights to produce the 'capital' or fundamental virtues that promote moral behavior, and the capital vices that lead to degeneration and moral decay (see Table 1). Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) developed Plato's idea of Forms by introducing the three transcendentals of being—truth, goodness and beauty—that reflect the nature of God and represent the highest ideals of human virtue. The idea of eudaimonia became updated to the ideas of redemption and salvation, attained through faith and good works, emphasizing the importance of moral virtue in building a peaceful world.

The term 'behavior' covers a range of natural inclinations that include: the need for security and nourishment, the yearning for intimacy and companionship, the drive for personal growth and self-improvement, the desire for authentic expression and meaningful communication, the formation of informed views and sentiments, and the pursuit of spiritual connection. The capital virtues regulate these inclinations to produce a balanced disposition in accordance with moral law and the higher aspirations, while the capital vices represent conditions of excess (lust, gluttony and greed), deficiency (sloth) and malice (wrath, envy and pride) that lead to discord, conflict, violence, and war (Aquinas, 2022; Tilby, 2013). This model has proven invaluable for understanding human behavior and analyzing social problems such as crime, as well as providing insights into the concept of sin within a Christian context, and more recently in the analysis of sustainability (Whitmore, 2024b).

Capital Virtue	Self-restraint	Moderation	Generosity	Diligence	Patience	Charity	Humility
Capital Vice	Lust	Gluttony	Greed	Sloth	Wrath	Envy	Pride

Table 1. The capital virtues and vices composed by Gregory the Great based upon earlier lists by Aristotle.

In early 14th century Renaissance Italy, these concepts and principles were synthesised into the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri (Alighieri, 2024; Baranski et al., 2018), a profound study of the human condition that depicted the dangers of moral abandonment and the importance of moral rectitude as a pathway to salvation, spiritual enlightenment and peace—an effective return to Eden (Ellard, 2007; Nee, 1968).

Many beliefs and traditions from around the world are consistent with the idea that peace is a moral issue (Flanagan, 2016). In Buddhism, inner peace is cultivated largely through meditation and the Eightfold Path of righteousness and compassion; and through inner peace, individuals have a different world view and can build a more humane and peaceful society (Yeh, 2006; Bawa, 2024). According to the Dalai Lama, 'Peace is not merely the absence of violence; it is the manifestation of human compassion'. Both Taoism and Confucianism teach that moral virtues such as simplicity, honesty, benevolence, compassion and humility lead to peace, social harmony and prosperity, and that proper ethical governance is critical for maintaining a peaceful society and peaceful relations with neighbors (von Norden, 2011). In Islam, the term *Salaam* signifies both individual inner peace and social peace, often relating to the peace of righteousness and encapsulating virtues such as patience, compassion, mercy and justice. In Hinduism, the principle of *Ahimsa* advocates non-violence, compassion, and respect for all living beings, promoting lifestyles that avoid causing harm—whether through physical actions, words, or thoughts—thereby nurturing peaceful relations and social harmony.

The many vital benefits of peace include:

- Absence of stress and anxiety enhances mental, emotional and physical health.
- Relationships can be built based on trust, respect, and cooperation.
- Fosters stable and prosperous communities that can flourish and advance together.
- Allows children to develop optimally without the burdens of conflict and violence.
- Free expression and creative pursuits flourish, driving artistic, scientific advancement.
- Crucial for safeguarding the environment, ensuring the flourishing of all life on Earth.

The next section explores these dynamics through the lens of the *Divine Comedy* showing how the capital virtues constitute a moral foundation for peace.

4. The Divine Comedy

The *Divine Comedy*, a three-part epic poem written by Dante Alighieri during political exile in northern Italy from 1308 to 1320, is widely regarded as one of the greatest works of world literature. Pope Francis has characterized it as 'an almost inexhaustible mine of knowledge, experience, and thought in every field of human research' (Francis, 2021). The poem narrates Dante's visionary journey through the afterlife, guided initially by the Roman poet Virgil and later by Beatrice his beloved.

Richly allegorical in nature (Singleton, 1950), the narrative depicts a moral universe where Virgil represents human reason and Beatrice divine revelation. It synthesizes centuries of cross-cultural philosophical and theological thought to explore the three realms of the afterlife: Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise. Throughout his journey, Dante engages in dialogues with souls who share profound insights into the moral dimensions of life and the consequences of individual choices and actions (Lansing, 2010). On several occasions in his journey, Dante is instructed to share these insights with a broader audience by writing the poem so that people might appreciate the importance of morality and ethical behavior. This makes the *Divine Comedy* not only a plan of the afterlife but a guide for living a moral life and resolving ethical dilemmas, particularly Purgatory which serves as a model for moral improvement.

The first canticle, *Inferno*, describes how harmful character traits or vices can sometimes take hold the soul – the inner human life (Gregory, 1993). This leads to a state of inner turmoil, confusion, craving, obsession and guilt, and results in actions that violate the moral law and cause chaos and suffering in the world. Unless they repent during life, these souls remain locked in this state in the afterlife realm of Inferno where the nature of havoc they caused combined with their anguish and guilt become punishment according to the principle *contrapasso* or counter-suffering, where the punishment reflects the sin. The entrance to Inferno is inscribed with the words 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here' (*Inf.* Canto 3), which echoes the biblical verse 'The soul that sinneth, it shall surely die' (Ezekiel 18:20); both of which underscore the dangers of sin and the importance of living a virtuous life.

Individuals who repented for their sins before they died and had genuine remorse for the harm and suffering they caused, Dante described these souls as finding themselves on a journey through the afterlife realm of Purgatory, described in the second canticle as a place of learning, moral transformation and spiritual renewal rather than eternal punishment. Embracing the virtues of faith, hope and love, souls in Purgatory strive to regain their innocence, integrity and free will through a combination of penance, reflection, learning, prayer and cultivation of the capital virtues.

Figure 2 shows an engraving by Venetian poet Ugo Foscolo from the 1842 edition of the *Divine Comedy* that depicts Dante's vision of Purgatory as a seven-terraced mountain and illustrates the activities at each terrace through the use of human figures. At the seven terraces above the main entrance, souls engage in a process of purification. At each terrace they purge themselves of one of the capital vices and acquire the corresponding capital virtue, starting with pride, which is replaced by humility. Ultimately, purified souls emerge into the Earthly Paradise at the top of the mountain—a realm of peace and tranquility—where they are cleansed of the memory of their earlier vices and misguided actions, and are confirmed in their attainment of free will and self-mastery.

At this time Dante witnesses a variety of figures and a mystical procession that have allegorical meaning in Christian theology. This scene emphasizes the need for special knowledge and the importance of study, meditation and contemplation as a means of making progress in the higher realms that Dante describes in *Paradiso*.

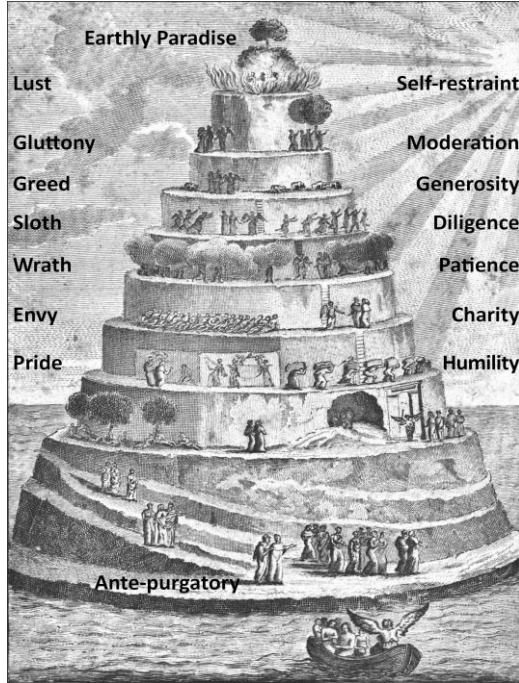


Figure 2. A 19th century engraving showing souls ascending Mount Purgatory, symbolizing the acquisition of moral virtues, towards the Earthly Paradise and peace.

The relevance of these insights today is demonstrated by the words of Prof. Lumumba at the 2023 Platform Nigeria conference: 'Africa is suffering because we elect the very worst to lead us... and Africa is only going to realize its potential when by dint of choice we enable and allow our best men and women to serve' (Lumumba, 2023). The dialogue with Marco Lombardo calls for a global moral awakening, and urges individuals to recognize and confront corruption, especially within public institutions and among officials who have a duty to honour the trust placed in them by the people and communities they represent.

In the third canticle, *Paradiso*, Dante's conversations with souls explain how divine justice is the underlying force that governs the universe (*Par.* Canto 6) and subsequently the source of the moral law and the foundation for a peaceful and harmonious society. The four cardinal virtues—justice, temperance, courage and prudence—are emphasized as underlying social responsibility and ethical conduct within society. The capital virtues cultivated in Purgatory can therefore be seen as a moral foundation for the development of these virtues, which are the building blocks of a peaceful and enlightened society.

The following sections explore how the capital vices give rise to conflict and violence in the world, and how the capital virtues lead towards a peaceful and sustainable society.

By the principle of Purgatory, Dante is sharing with humanity a pathway or roadmap to peace—ultimately represented by Earthly Paradise—achieved through a process of moral transformation and a reframing of human purpose away from egocentric and materialistic pursuits towards spiritual growth and learning.

Midway on his journey through Purgatory, Dante converses with the soul of Marco Lombardo who explains that crime and violence in society stem from poor leadership and not from inherent corruption within individuals. Marco acknowledges the influence of corrupt leaders in leading people astray but emphasizes that each individual remains accountable for their own choices. He emphasizes the importance of virtuous governance, in which leaders prioritize the common good over personal gain and embody moral integrity and a commitment to justice and peace.

5. The capital vices as the underlying cause of conflict and violence

Table 2 illustrates how the capital vices lead individuals to act in ways that contravene moral principles, causing harm to themselves and others, ultimately leading to conflict and violence. This can manifest directly, as when a person acts out of anger toward another, or indirectly by creating environments of inequality and injustice that lead to increasing tensions and hostility over time.

Vice	Leading to conflict and violence
Lust	Appropriates free will, fosters selfishness and egoism, distorts healthy relationships, leads to competition, objectification, resentment, and ultimately to conflict and violence.
Gluttony	Breeds inequity and resource depletion, giving rise to competition, resentment, animosity and societal breakdown, which lead to further unrest and violence.
Greed	Incites competition, fosters inequality and corruption, disregard for the wellbeing of others, erodes trust, and incites resentment and animosity; all of which lead to conflict and violence.
Sloth	Undermines societal integrity and harmony through neglect of infrastructure and services, leading to systemic decay, frustration, disillusionment, unrest, crime and violence.
Wrath	Fuels violence and retaliation, creating a cycle of vengeance that breeds fear, divides communities, and undermines social cohesion and stability.
Envy	Undermines relationships and the social fabric, erodes trust, breeds animosity, conflict and hostility, blocks cooperation, resulting in societal breakdown and violence.
Pride	Fosters a sense of entitlement, complacency, lack of empathy and unwillingness to negotiate, compromise or collaborate, leading to animosity, hostility and igniting violence.

Table 2. *The capital vices and their negative effects on individual inner peace and societal peace.*

In *Inferno* Dante explains how these vices can take root in the soul or inner life of individuals, turning them away from the good into actions or sins that are harmful for themselves and for others (Lansing, 1981). Gradually and over time if not rectified the vice, which acts as a kind of poison to the soul, can grow and spread affecting other aspects of the soul—the intellect for example attempting to hide or rationalise moral failing, can become dishonest and deceptive even unto itself.

Dante describes three main categories of sin—characterised by a lack of self-control, violence, and fraud—that are a result of the capital vices acting either individually or in combinations. These are punished according to the principle of *contrapasso*: the lustful, for example, being swept around by strong winds representing the disorientation and confusion brought upon them by their excessive desire for sensual and sexual pleasure, the wrathful and the sullen being submerged in the foul-smelling river Styx, representing the degradation resulting from their bitterness and rage; the more malicious, harmful and deliberate the sin, the harsher the punishment.

Lust is an excessive desire or craving for physical pleasure, luxury and indulgence. When unchecked it leads to inner turmoil, disorientation and self-centeredness, can become consuming and lead to irrationality and objectification of others. The broader consequences of lust include further moral degradation, infidelity that can disrupt families and affect children's development, and violent crimes driven by obsession and addiction, while competing desires among individuals can lead to conflict, destabilization of relationships and communities, hostility and violence.

Examples of how lust has led to violence include: the famous real-life story of Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, described in *Inferno* Canto 5, in which their surrender to lust led to the fatal consequence of them both being killed by Paolo's brother who was married to Francesca; in Homer's *The Iliad*, Paris, who was married to Oenone, was also driven by lust to seduce and abduct Helen, the wife of Menelaus, instigating the decade-long Trojan war.

Gluttony is an excessive desire for indulgence and consumption. It promotes self-centeredness, alienation from others and stifles and consumes individual character and potential. Extending beyond just food and drink, gluttony overconsumes resources in general, making it a destructive force that drives personal degradation and a culture of excess and waste. As the world's population grows and natural resources become more scarce due to over exploitation, competition for remaining resources can ignite anger, resentment, and violence. Gluttony does not merely manifest in personal excess but ripples outwards, disrupting peace and harmony on a larger scale.

Today, with obesity emerging as a global health epidemic, gluttony has become a pervasive issue jeopardizing the stability of communities and the environment. Resource extraction, waste disposal and pollution from excessive consumption, incite global tensions, discord, conflicts and violence. The fall of Rome is often attributed, at least in part, to the gluttony and other moral excesses of the ruling class, which deprived the populace of necessary resources to survive, and subsequently led to massive inequality, widespread resentment and eventual rebellion.

Greed is an excessive desire for material wealth and property. Striving to acquire, own and possess always more, individuals driven by greed can lose their empathy and become dishonest, deceptive and corrupt. Greed can drive criminal activity and abuse of power as well as the exploitation of others, and can lead to rationalisation of violence and destruction as a means of increasing wealth. Native Americans traditionally view greed as a sickness of the soul, referring to it as *wetiko* the cannibalism of life and resources for personal gratification (Levi 2021). Sufi mysticism describes greed as a blockage to spiritual growth and unity with God. Buddha considered greed to be a root cause of suffering and a major obstacle to spiritual growth, and according to Confucius 'If an individual's actions are motivated by profit, they will accumulate many enemies'.

Examples include: the Spanish conquest, which devastated Mesoamerican civilizations, was primarily fueled by the European ruling classes' greed for gold and silver; the Indian Wars which were largely motivated by the greed for gold, silver and land; and current conflicts in the Middle East that are largely driven by greed for oil and profits, with corporations and governments competing for ownership and control of 'black gold'.

Sloth is a lack of effort, zeal and motivation. Those who succumb to sloth act with apathy and indifference and make little or no positive contribution to any aspect of society. In a culture of sloth, personal relationships as well as societal infrastructure and services all deteriorate, and the safeguards intended to regulate the smooth running of societies fail. The result is an increase in crime, injustice and violence, societal discord and moral decay.

Examples include: the lack of timely and effective response by the international community that allowed the 1994 Hutu genocidal campaign against the Tutsi to take place, leading to an estimated 800,000 deaths; the continuing failure of these same institutions to condemn human rights violations in Myanmar, Palestine and Tibet and to effectively bring about peaceful resolutions (Lilly, 2021; UN, 2024d; Sandhar, 2016).

Wrath is a malignant and consuming form of anger or rage. If left unchecked, it clouds the mind, making it hard to think clearly or act rationally, damages relationships and destabilizes communities. It very often leads to aggression and violence, producing a toxic environment where dialogue is replaced by hostility. Throughout history, wrath has led to many conflicts and wars, with propaganda used to incite hatred and amplify anger. While Aristotle's concept of 'righteous indignation' acknowledges the validity of anger in response to injustice or wrongdoing, it emphasizes the importance of tempering that anger with reason; otherwise, it spirals out of control and no peaceful solution can be found.

In Europe in 1914 accumulated wrath among nations, aristocratic families and their leaders ignited into 4 years of violence and killing with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand; the American revolution was fueled by wrath over British oppression of the colonies; the killing of Michael Brown in 2014 and George Floyd in 2020 likewise ignited widespread wrath into nationwide riots protesting systemic racism in the US.

Envy is enmity prompted by covetousness. The wilful deliberation put into envy makes it a dangerous and harmful vice that motivates a wide range of both violent and fraudulent actions. It schemes, plots, undermines, subverts, betrays, incites rivalry and competition, leading to conflict, hostility and violence, and acts as a catalyst for other destructive behavior, breaking up relationships and communities, fostering societal discord, crime and violence.

Examples include: the French Revolution (1789-1799), as the majority of the population who made up the third estate resented the wealth and privileges of the upper classes of the second estate, resulting in a decade of violent uprisings in which several thousand nobles and aristocrats were executed; and the brutal oppression and murder of some 15 million indigenous Congolese between 1885 and 1908 by the Force Publique army of King Leopold II of Belgium in an attempt to equal and surpass the riches and opulence of neighbouring colonial nations through the extraction of rubber and ivory in the Congo (Casement, 2021; Anstey, 1971).

Pride, as understood in Dante's time, is an exaggerated sense of self-importance. Characterized by vanity, arrogance, and hubris, pride is a wilful and malignant condition and a significant driver of hostility, conflict and violence, that breeds self-righteousness, disdain for others, competitive rivalries, ethnocentrism and racism. Subsequently, pride is a significant driver of colonialism, hegemony, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, which oppose the ideals of humanity, respect of human rights, peace and cooperation. Pride is considered the 'master vice' because it affirms and validates the others; it self-justifies aggression, rejects dialogue and negotiation, and refuses to compromise, making it an underlying cause of numerous conflicts and acts of violence and war.

By worshipping the self-image, both individuals and nations disconnect themselves from the authentic timeline of progress, and become obsolete; rather than developing and growing in character, wisdom or quality, they simply inflate.

Statements like 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian' (Mieder, 1993) and 'In the East, life is cheap and not important' (Davis, 1974), illustrate how pride and arrogance can overlook the humanity and intrinsic value of others, fueling violence and war. Although not alone in this, the U.S. entered into over 500 treaties with Native American nations, yet from a position of presumed moral superiority, repeatedly broke, violated, or altered each one, leading to anger, resentment and fueling violent resistance from the Indigenous peoples (UN 2013).

6. The capital virtues as a pathway towards sustainable peace

Table 3 illustrates how the capital virtues lay the groundwork for moral behavior, shaping the character of individuals and protecting the integrity and humanity of society. In *Purgatorio*, Dante explains how souls acquire these virtues through a blend of penance, reflection, prayer, dialogue, and guidance, liberating themselves from vice and reclaiming their free-will and natural inclination toward goodness.

Virtue	Contributing to long-term sustainable peace
Humility	Enables a broader view of the world that is more inclusive and respectful of others, accepts personal accountability and is prepared to collaborate to achieve peaceful solutions.
Charity	Fosters a culture of kindness and support based in sharing, benevolence and mercy, alleviates suffering and poverty, promotes equity, builds friendship and trust among individuals and nations.
Patience	Enables individuals to pause, reflect and wait in order to respond more calmly and thoughtfully, to learn and understand, and to implement longer-term peaceful solutions.
Diligence	Builds stable relationships and societies through consistent effort and dedication, develops and implements peaceful alternatives, works tirelessly to learn and understand complexities.
Generosity	Promotes abundance and sharing, is inclusive of others to build social cohesion, and prioritizes community spirit over material possessions to foster peace and harmony.
Moderation	Promotes balance in desires and behaviours, tempers the extremes that can lead to conflict, and facilitates peaceful interactions, collaboration and diplomatic resolutions.
Self-restraint	Encourages cooperation and dialogue, prevents conflict escalation, builds trust, enables longer-term focused efforts, and enhances resilience to achieve and maintain lasting peace.

Table 3. *The capital virtues and their positive effects on establishing long-term sustainable peace.*

Dante characterizes Purgatory as a transformative journey of purification—an undoing of the damage caused by vice and sin. Once they achieve purification, souls enter Earthly Paradise, where they are restored to their true purpose and embark on a path toward spiritual enlightenment. This is consistent with the concept of *restoration*—return of the creation to its original state, the Garden of Eden—and is explored and developed in Book 14 of the *City of God* by Saint Augustine (354–430 AD) in terms of an ideal society that lives in accordance with moral law, embodies divine grace, justice and peace, and expresses profound love for God and fellow human beings (Augustine, 2003).

Acquisition of the capital virtues therefore represents a pathway of moral transformation that can not only save individuals but society as a whole, recovering from a history of aggressive conflict and violence, and restoring a state of peace.

Humility is the quality that enables individuals to have a realistic view of themselves and their place in the universe. When we look at the universe and reflect upon its vastness and majesty and the miracles of life, such as how a tiny seed becomes a massive tree, or how animals know so much through instinct, and the intensity and purity of life in a new born baby, we see a cosmos that is alive and that produces life, every stage of which is filled with value and meaning. While pride alienates us from this, humility yearns to be part of it, to respect it and learn from its ways. The journey through the capital virtues therefore starts with gratitude and a desire to live a life that is peaceful and does no harm.

Today, we must have the humility to recognize that our own attitudes and moral condition have brought us to an existential crisis where our extinction as a species and the

destruction of the planet are close at hand, and that if we want to avert that catastrophe, save the planet, restore peace and harmony and secure a bright future for generations to come, we must be prepared to change.

Humility enables us to recognise our weaknesses and to work on them, and our strengths and we are prepared to put them into service for the benefit of the greater good, we recognise and learn from our mistakes, we recognise our own culpabilities in leading to violence and war, we consider the viewpoints and struggles of others and we act with social and environmental responsibility, respecting and not disturbing the peace. Prayer for guidance and understanding helps us to be in harmony with Logos and the spiritual source of life at its core that our conscience connects us to (Nee, 1968).

In *Purgatory*, souls cultivate humility in place of pride. They engage in deep reflection on their past lives, and how their arrogance had alienated them from others and even from themselves, fostering a loneliness and emptiness. Many opportunities that could have led further and more deeply into life, were squandered because of their inflated sense of self that would not let them become authentically involved with others. They are presented with images and examples of humility that help them appreciate the value of community—both with God and with each other—and to see themselves as a thread within a much larger tapestry, in which what really counts is the bigger picture the tapestry makes rather than the individual threads alone.

Examples of humility include Nelson Mandela, who after spending 27 years in prison, emerged with a message of reconciliation and forgiveness that transcended apartheid, leading to a peaceful transition to democracy in South Africa (Mandela, 1995); and the words of Abraham Lincoln 'My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right'.

Charity is a quality of mind and a way of thinking, that desires the world and all within it, great and small, to be well and to flourish. Through acts of mercy, forgiveness, and kindness, giving to those in need, it affirms the inherent worth and dignity of others. In this way, it helps create a peaceful and more humane world, reduces inequality, fosters cooperation and mutual support, and promotes a culture of empathy, value and respect; and enables each individual through their unique contributions to help shape the world for the better. If a culture of charity were to permeate the human world, trust, friendship, cooperation, security and peace would follow among individuals and nations.

In *Purgatory* souls develop charity in place of envy. They learn that thriving at the expense of others is counter to the natural inclination to love; and they learn to find happiness in the happiness of others. They learn that charity is the foundation of peace because it heals the conditions that lead to suffering, unrest and conflict, such as inequity, injustice and poverty, and builds healthy communities.

One of the primary functions of monasteries and convents throughout history has been charitable work; Mother Teresa was one of the most inspiring examples of charity, dedicating her life to caring for the sick, poor and malnourished in India, providing food, medical care, and shelter to those in need, and fostering peace and harmony among diverse ethnic communities through her selfless acts of love and compassion.

Patience is the quality of being able to wait while maintaining a state of calm and composure. It is essential for both individual inner peace and societal peace, and it enables individuals to listen to others without judgment, pressure, or anger, and provides the

necessary time for positive changes to unfold. Many of the SDGs require sustained effort over the long term, and development initiatives will encounter resistance and setbacks; this calls for patience, which will allow time for understanding and trust to grow, which are essential if progress is to be made through respect, agreements and cooperation.

In *Purgatory* souls acquire patience in place of wrath; they engage in reflection and dialogue with each other to learn about the dangers of wrath, and the importance of being able to let go of anger, and instead embrace peace and harmony. They come to realize that resolving conflicts through patience and understanding is the only way to lasting peace, and that energy and effort should be focused on positive results and not wasted in anger.

Examples of patience include Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance against the oppression and injustice of British colonial rule, which showed that systemic change can occur peacefully (Gandhi, 2009); and the patience of the German people who endured for 28 years waiting for the fall of the Berlin Wall and peaceful national reunification.

Diligence is the persistent and conscientious pursuit of what is good. The universe could be said to have formed through billions of years of diligent processes that turn potential into reality. We can manifest the same diligence in our own lives. Clean safe societies are a result of many people working tirelessly to build and maintain the systems and structures that make society function. And to the extent that our societies embody the moral law, they will flourish and stand the test of time, and the people will be happy. It is imperative that humanity dedicate itself to peaceful alternatives, just as we seek out sustainable alternatives. Diligence is essential for successful communication, cooperation and for building understanding and trust, for it makes the committed effort to achieve these things and goes the extra distance to find and implement practical solutions.

In *Purgatorio*, souls acquire diligence in place of sloth; they run at high speed in different directions, and by reciting prayers at the same time, build enthusiasm and zeal which are the basis of diligence. Through self-reflection they realise the dangers of sloth and the value of dedicated concerted efforts in directing and focusing energy to worthwhile objectives and that provide opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.

Specific examples of diligence include anti-bullying programs that reduce discrimination and violence in schools; restorative justice programs that bring victims and offenders together to discuss the effects of crime, find understanding and forgiveness, and rebuild society; and education and awareness programs have played a large part in developing public awareness and understanding of environmental and sustainability issues, which is vital if sustainability initiatives are to gain widespread support.

Generosity is the quality of giving and sharing without the expectation of anything in return. This fosters a culture of abundance, which helps restore balance and equality in the world, leading to a more just and peaceful society. The importance of generosity is that it changes individuals and nations from being greedy consumers into generators of positive change and prosperity, which can strengthen communities, encourage reciprocity and relationships based in mutual giving and sharing, build trust and friendship, and address inequality and injustice, all of which contribute to peace.

In *Purgatory*, souls develop generosity in place of greed. They reflect on the proper use of wealth and the importance of sharing with those in need, and contrast the attachment to material possessions with compassion and friendship, learning that generosity is essential for spiritual growth and for social harmony.

Examples include the numerous UN-led initiatives that have demonstrated generosity in the form of humanitarian aid and development programs that have brought peace around the world, such as UNICEF's Global Child Protection Programs that have enhanced the welfare and protection of children worldwide; and Desmond Tutu who drew upon the Zulu *Ubuntu* philosophy (Molefe, 2024) to emphasize communal support, forgiveness and generosity, to heal and bring peace to South Africa after apartheid.

Moderation is the principle of selecting the middle path between two extremes. It promotes a balanced and rational approach to thinking, actions and emotions, that is neither too much nor too little; and can be regulated in relation to the need. By avoiding extremes moderation promotes tolerance, reduces stress, and facilitates communication, cooperation, compromise and diplomacy. More sparing and reasonable use of resources promotes sustainable living, equality and amicable relations. Moderation plays an essential role in establishing and maintaining peace.

In *Purgatory*, souls acquire moderation in place of gluttony by being prevented from reaching delicious fruits on trees, which forces them to overcome their excessive hunger. They reflect on the dangers of overindulgence as a distorting factor in their character, and they learn to appreciate a rational and balanced approach to life. Today, where society tends easily towards polarization and extremes in many issues, particularly political and ideological, moderation is essential to maintain peace.

As an example, the Magna Carta of 1215 moderated the excessive demands of the British monarchy, who had until then extorted and oppressed the people, and established fundamental principles of governance such as the rule of law and due process and set the precedent that even the richest and most powerful people in the land are not above the law, which led to greater peace and harmony throughout the land.

Self-restraint is the ability to control the impulses, emotions and desires that crave for indulgence and self-gratification. Through this act of will, individuals can reclaim their freedom of choice, and this enables a more conscious and thoughtful approach to life and the pursuit of longer-term goals that require commitment and dedication. The traditional images of Lao-Tzu riding an ox, Guanyin standing on a snake and Saint Michael subduing the dragon symbolize the successful control and management of the lower passions to achieve a state of mental clarity, tranquillity and peace.

In *Purgatory*, souls acquire self-restraint in place of lust; they must endure being immersed in intense flames that represent the struggles and desires that once controlled their lives. By facing and overcoming these flames—not through denial but through acceptance and resilience—they regain their free will. This not only liberates them from the bonds of lust and desire, but other potentially destructive impulses such as the impulse to act aggressively or to buy something without really needing it. There are many flashpoints in the world today, and the Doomsday Clock is closer to midnight than it has ever been (BAS 2025). At the present time, self-restraint is critical if individuals and nations are to avoid conflict and society remain peaceful.

Examples of self-restraint include the Cuban Missile Crisis where both the U.S. and the USSR were able to de-escalate tensions and reach a mutually agreeable deal that ensured peace; the Great Peace of the Iroquois (1450s-1640s) was achieved through a system of diplomacy and self-restraint, where disputes were resolved through dialogue, consensus and cooperation rather than force.

7. Discussion

Historical records and archaeological findings show that violence and warfare have plagued humanity for millennia (Parker, 2020). Recent and ongoing conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and other parts of the world show that these threats still persist, threatening the lives of human beings, other species and the planet. While it is true that humanity has become fragmented into groups, often defined by nation or ethnicity, and that disputes can arise between such groups, they do not have to result in violence or war.

As moral principles are intended to safeguard the well-being of individuals and communities, acts of violence represent moral failure and are often seen as a symptom of moral decay. Each person has a duty to manage and control their own actions as well as their own thoughts and emotions in order to be a safe, trustworthy and responsible member of society, and to understand and respect the moral law as a guide to ethical conduct. This particularly applies to leaders in society, such as politicians and teachers, who have the duty to lead the nation towards peaceful goals and not into violent conflicts and war.

While aggression and the struggle for dominance have been prevalent in the past, such behaviors are morally degrading and distort our humanity: we do not become better humans by subjugating, oppressing, or killing our fellow beings. The moral law transcends national and ethnic boundaries to demand that we acknowledge the inherent dignity and value of each and every human being and find ways to live together peacefully. The question is: do we have the humility to abide by the moral law and the diligence and patience to work out and implement peaceful solutions?

The fact that we can solve complex problems intelligently and of understanding principles such as fairness and justice means that violent conflict and war are not only moral failures but also failure of our ability to reason, understand and act accordingly. The term Logos, while encompassing a variety of meanings, also means discourse, which affirms today's explosion of global media as an opportunity for solving disputes and conflicts through international dialogue, education, forums and discussion.

The world will remain a battleground of individuals and groups vying for wealth, power and control until we learn to value life and prioritise human rights and dignity for all (Jones 1991). So long as vices such as greed and pride prevail, peace will remain an elusive quality because vices will always agitate against it. Greed, for example, is not satiated by having enough, it always wants more, and will always drive inequity and poverty, leading to resentment, animosity and conflict. This can lead to systems of governance becoming warped, weakening the state, inciting lack of trust and leading to unrest and violence.

Legal systems, for instance, are often claimed to be biased in favor of wealthier individuals, leading to disparities in justice; democratic processes are increasingly perceived as operating on the principle of 'one dollar, one vote' rather than 'one person, one vote'; inadequate regulation can lead to business monopolization and financial inequality; markets and economies competing on a global scale and vying for excessive profits can also be a source of conflict, particularly when supported by military force (Butler, 2003).

The *Divine Comedy* offers vital insight into wealth and prosperity. In *Purgatorio* Canto 15, Virgil explains the principles of divine multiplication and terrestrial division: accumulation of spiritual wealth—such as knowledge, love, kindness and wisdom—increases its availability to others, while pursuit of material wealth such as land and

precious metals reduces its availability for others. Therefore, defining prosperity in terms of material wealth guarantees conflict, violence and war. A concept of prosperity that emphasizes mindfulness, cultivation of moral virtues, spiritual growth and community spirit might form the basis for a more peaceful and sustainable world (Whitmore, 2024a).

To address these issues, several proposals are suggested. Firstly, to relocate SDG-16, which focuses on peace, justice and strong institutions, to first place in the list of SDGs to reflect the urgent need for peace worldwide and the importance of peace in achieving the other SDGs. This would require collaboration among governments, NGOs, and local communities to integrate peacebuilding initiatives into governmental policies, legal frameworks, community structures, and ongoing sustainability efforts to cultivate a more holistic approach based on peace as an essential foundation.

The goal provides modules to enhance justice and build strong institutions, both of which are critical to maintaining peace. To add to this is beyond the current study, but systemic integrity is clearly an essential aspect of it. The extent to which corruption exists is largely a reflection of the moral character of individuals. Grey areas need to be identified and addressed: for example, the lobbying of government officials and the revolving door between regulating agencies and the institutions they regulate. AI has potential to revolutionize these systems and enhance law enforcement through real-time monitoring of transactions and data mining.

It is suggested that this goal integrate with organizations that are calling for nuclear disarmament and emissions accountability for the military. A peaceful coexistence of nations is not encouraged by the presence and development of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. It would be of great benefit to humanity if scientific thinking was diverted away from these areas to more benign and constructive initiatives such as environmental clean-up, forest preservation and cultivation of international relations and friendships. A potential consideration is a 10-year peace plan between all nations, which would act as a statement of good will and provide the opportunity to eliminate weapons stockpiles and allow a longer span of time to achieve the SDGs.

Long-term peace cannot be achieved using the same vices that led to conflict. For this reason, history tends to repeat itself, as the same patterns play out time and again. To attain lasting peace from conflict, it is essential to first stop the violence. Each party must then withdraw and reflect upon their actions to understand how vices are driving their part in the conflict, and they must then work through the capital virtues to transform their aggression into peace. This will foster the insights and attitudes necessary for each party to align themselves with moral principles, so that dialogue can then arrive at a peaceful solution and a progressive understanding that will support peace on a long-term basis.

It is also suggested that SDG-4, which focuses on education, be revised to include morality and virtue ethics. One of the most important functions or obligations of schools and colleges is to teach young people the moral law and the importance of upholding it. For example, to respect the rights of others, to be honest and to contribute to society in positive ways, these are essential principles that are not always picked up through family life but can be taught in schools and demonstrated by teachers.

This is essential to enhance students' understanding of the existential balances of life, personal responsibility, and the interconnectedness of peoples, nations, and the planet (MGIEP 2014; Abebe et al., 2004; Schuitema et al., 2008). Self-awareness and critical thinking need to be encouraged so that students can learn first-hand the reasons for moral

principles and ethical behavior, understand the implications of their actions, and recognize that peace is a collective responsibility in which each individual has a duty to live peacefully and use their education to build a peaceful future.

Teacher training programs would need to be introduced in colleges to train teachers how to approach ethical questions and dilemmas in the classroom, how to develop stories that demonstrate the value of moral and ethical behavior, and how to encourage critical thinking, self-awareness, reasoning and personal responsibility, encouraging teachers themselves to examine their own moral values (Higgins, 2010).

Additionally, it is proposed that university students, particularly those in the physical, chemical, and biological sciences, take an oath similar to the Hippocratic Oath of non-maleficence taken by medical students. This would promote ethical considerations and a sense of responsibility among scientists, reducing the risk of advanced knowledge being misused, and boosting public trust in science and the scientific community.

The teaching of morality and ethics extends beyond the classroom: while schools and colleges focus on the secular perspective, churches and temples have a duty to teach the spiritual. The Ten Commandments, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, The Eightfold Path, the Analects of Confucius, the Tao Te Ching, and so on, provide essential insights and truths that can facilitate the development of moral reasoning and moral character throughout life, helping to grow responsible, wise and compassionate individuals that can contribute towards a flourishing and peaceful society, as well as promoting an understanding and appreciation of other nations and cultures (Asif et al., 2020).

The Renaissance is widely recognized as a pivotal period in human history that marked a transition from communal thinking to individuality and personal responsibility. This is evident in Dante's poem that calls for individual ethical accountability as it is in the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilei who thought outside the bounds of the rigid and dogmatic reference systems and mindset of their day. Today, sustainability depends on humans being aware and responsible, knowing that if we fail to act, the planet will be devastated by overexploitation, pollution, and damage caused by wars. While personal freedom is a foundation of a healthy society, it must be coupled with responsibility to ensure safety and avoid conflict and violence.

A focus on the capital virtues represents a reorganization of human life, embodying more humane and compassionate values, a less materialistic view of prosperity, and a deeper understanding of meaning and purpose. For example: If buildings were designed and built with humility, what would cities look like? If nations truly embraced charity, would global poverty be eliminated? If self-restraint were more common, would society be safer? If patience were more prevalent, would the world be wiser? This shift would direct humanity away from a trajectory of potential destruction to a path of peace and harmony, where all people coexist and thrive. According to Thomas Jefferson 'peace and friendship with all mankind is our wisest policy'.

Peace, awareness, humanity, spirituality, responsibility, evolution, moral integrity and sustainability are all interconnected. According to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, evolution is not simply a biological process but a cosmic and spiritual journey toward a collective consciousness (de Chardin, 2008), in which individuals and societies grow through knowledge, cooperation, and love, with individual awareness evolving to a higher state of unity, compassion and understanding.

The *Ubuntu* sentiment 'I am because we are' encourages a similar world view in which humanity, the planet and other species are seen to be interconnected; affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all beings and asserting that no one is truly safe until everyone is safe. Such views open doorways that allow individuals and nations to respect and appreciate each other, which is essential for sustainability and peace. The old mindset that said that it was okay to go to war needs to be replaced (Steiner, 2008). What is needed today is a *mindset of peace* that rejects violence and war and is dedicated to the principle of progress through peace.

It is therefore vital that international forums such as the UN continue to provide spaces and opportunities where dialogue and exchange of ideas among nations and cultures can help unite humanity in mutual respect and understanding; even the Security Council might benefit from a broader representation including nations such as Thailand, Tibet and Sri Lanka whose Buddhist faith emphasizes compassion and peace.

Another possible consideration is the creation of sustainable communities centered around diverse belief systems such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Shinto. Such communities could provide opportunities for dialogue and cross-cultural learning, potentially leading to a transcendent unifying identity and common ground for cooperation and peace. Historically, monasteries housed hundreds of monks or nuns, with larger institutions like Cluny and Tashi Lhunpo accommodating over 1,000 at a time (Mullins, 2006; Tashi Lhunpo, 2024). The contemplative orders focus on peaceful practices, prayer, study, and community service, making them valuable models of both peaceful and sustainable living.

The *Divine Comedy* suggests that there are three possibilities for human society. The first, represented by *Inferno* is moral abandonment, a world of selfishness and brutality, of individuals and groups fighting against each other for resources, dominance, wealth and control. Such a world would foster endless wars and devastation until the end of humanity and the planet. The second possibility, represented by *Purgatorio*, would be a world in which humanity makes every effort to rescue itself from the edge of calamity by dedicating itself to moral improvement, responsibility, justice and peaceful coexistence. The third possibility, represented by *Paradiso*, would be a world of peace and harmony, security and freedom, kinship and unity, divine grace, wisdom and tranquility in which humans would prosper through true and deep spiritual fulfilment.

These three possibilities are consistent with two directions: ascent towards wisdom, gentleness, compassion and understanding, or descent into barbarism, self-destruction and extinction. Dante's model of Purgatory, as a system of moral transformation, provides a pathway to ascend—a journey of moral progress in which greed is transformed into generosity, wrath into patience, sloth into diligence, lust into self-restraint, gluttony into moderation, envy into charity and pride into humility.

Mankind has the potential to truly enrich the Earth with its presence, and perhaps to live on here for many millennia to come. Who knows where the spiritual path of humanity will lead and how its potential will unfold? History tells us that there are times in the human journey that are critical, and when a little something extra is called for in order to stay on course. It seems that now is one of those times. We just need to let go of those 'egocentric and conflictive tendencies' for they are messing things up and make a dedicated commitment to peace. Moral development is the central pillar of our future, and virtue ethics must guide us toward peace and sustainability.

8. Conclusion

Peace is a fundamental and critical aspect of sustainable development; and is particularly urgent right now because the volatile conditions around the globe combined with the destructive power of modern weaponry pose a grave threat to life on Earth. This study has shown that the driving force behind violence and war is moral, either directly or indirectly, specifically the capital vices, and that the only long-term solution that leads to peace is a systemic moral transformation of human society.

While disagreements and disputes are a natural part of human relations, resorting to violence can be seen as a moral failure. Peaceful coexistence is an essential foundation that allows humanity to flourish. The moral law, as a set of moral principles, guides human behavior to that end; the capital virtues, as a set of fundamental qualities, enable human beings to adhere to the moral law and progress towards a more peaceful, balanced, sustainable, warmly human and enlightened state of being and coexistence.

Including morality and virtue ethics in SDG-4 on education will emphasize the importance of moral principles and individual responsibility. The capital virtues can be taught as a profound cross-cultural system to guide moral conduct, the capital vices as a tool to analyze social behaviors, motivations, and the root causes of crime and violence. By including other moral systems, education can build respect, understanding and kinship among diverse peoples by exploring fundamental questions about our identity, purpose, and place in the universe.

It is suggested that SDG-16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, be promoted to SDG-1 as it is critical for the other SDGs. A 10-year global peace plan signed by all nations would further facilitate the SDGs free from the threat of violence and provide an opportunity for nuclear disarmament and the redirection of scientific activities to more benign objectives.

Governments, educational institutions, and international forums can play a vital role in promoting morality and virtue ethics as a foundation for peaceful coexistence and friendship among peoples and nations. Over the course of one or two generations, the memory of violence would give way to the unique beauty of diverse cultures and the inherent dignity and worth of all people, and a vision of a peaceful and sustainable future characterized by the kinship of all peoples and nations.

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