Responsibilities towards places in a degrowth society: how firms can become more responsible via embracing deep ecology

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ABSTRACT: This article contemplates and proposes responsibilities towards places. Such responsibilities cannot be reduced to a mere sum of responsibilities towards humans and nature. Rather, they form a pathway to think about humans, non-humans, and nature in a way that brings to the surface their deep and place-based inter-connection. Coming from the perspective that a degrowth society is desirable, the article aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on degrowth transformations. To understand deeper how responsibilities towards places can be enacted, I rely on the philosophy of deep ecology and suggest that each firm can develop and manifest in its practices its own ecosophy. I conclude that contemplating responsibilities towards places can be a space where degrowth scholars and scholars of corporate social responsibility can meet in a mutually enriching dialogue.
KEYWORDS: place, degrowth, deep ecology, transformation, corporate social responsibility

INTRODUCTION

I invite reading what follows in light of a quote from Snyder (1995, p. 148), the words written a while ago and not necessarily in relation to firms. They capture well, though in a somewhat poetic way, the thought that I will unfold in this article: "no transfor-

mation without our feet on the ground. Stewardship means, for most of us, find your place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there [...]. Even when holding in mind the largest scale of potential change. Get a sense of workable territory, learn about it, and start acting point by point".

Scholars and practitioners working with the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in a broad sense are on a journey to understand how diverse firms and other organisations can act towards nature and in society differently, what acting differently could mean and how it could be manifested in practice (Matthews et al., forthcoming). While CSR itself is an ambiguous and complex concept with a long and conflicted history (Pedersen, 2006; Steensen & Villadsen, 2020), at the heart thereof is an assumption that firms exist within human societies and the natural environment and need to behave accordingly via assuming responsibilities for their actions in the natural and social world. Throughout this article, the term "firm" is used often. Though the nature of a firm is debated, here I adopt Lawson's (2015) definition of a firm as a social entity that has economic and legal nature. According to Lawson (2015), the limited company or corporation is a specific form of firm. Though the economic and the legal aspects of a firm's nature are essential to recognise (not least to acknowledge a profit motive), it is the *social* or *human* nature of a firm that is of particular interest for my exploration: firms are communities of human beings. Human beings, at least according to some traditions which adopt a positive view on human nature, such as humanism (Maslow, 1964, 1999; May, 2007) and critical realism (Bhaskar, 2002a, 2002b; Sayer, 2011), are beings capable of concern, love, care, empathy, relatedness, right action, and self-transformations.

Rather than inviting business practitioners to focus narrowly on profit or to supplement profit with peripheral or even tokenistic considerations towards society and nature, scholars began to invite firms to seriously consider a much broader picture and take on more responsibilities. Much of the literature where acting in the world differently means a radical, deeply transformative change currently comes from the field of degrowth (e.g., Heikkurinen, 2013; Nesterova, 2020b). This field has its more immediate roots in the 1960s and 1970s and those decades' critique of economic growth and transgressing of the planet's limits. While degrowth is a direction in economic and social thought, there is no single definition or universal agreement among all degrowth scholars what degrowth means and entails exactly. Traditionally, degrowth scholarship emphasised reduction in production and consumption and tended to focus on economies (e.g., Hickel, 2021; Schneider et al., 2010). A recent definition of degrowth, inspired by critical realism, conceptualises degrowth as "deep transformations occurring on all four interrelated planes of social being [humans' material transactions with nature, social relations, social structures, people's inner being], on different scales and in all sites, guided by gentleness and care, towards a society co-existing harmoniously within itself and with nature" (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023, p. 8). Similar views are prominent in other fields of thought that do not necessarily identify themselves as degrowth but can be seen as related to, compatible with, or sympathetic to degrowth due to their advocacy of limits to growth and a normative position of a lasting, peaceful and harmonious co-existence between humanity and nature. The American envi-

ronmentalist movement (e.g., Leopold, 1989; Thoreau, 2016), humanism (e.g., Fromm, 2013), and the philosophy and movement of deep ecology are such fields (Naess, 1989, 1995a; 2002, 2016; Sessions, 1995).

It is important to note that contemplating firms in relation to degrowth is not un-controversial[1]. Alternative forms of organisations and production (e.g., cooperatives, foraging, community gardens, self-sufficiency/homesteading) are logically and intu-itively, and perhaps ideologically, better aligned with degrowth due to their explicit stepping away from the capitalist logic, the imperatives of growth and profit seeking, and from commonly found organisational forms. However, it is important to address already existing more conventional organisations and seek ways for them to step on degrowth paths rather than merely label them as incompatible with degrowth. Avoid-ing addressing such organisations seems counterproductive. The path of separating organisations into degrowth and not-degrowth ones may deprive the currently (sup-posedly) not-degrowth ones from engagement with degrowth ideas, when the aim should be to invite more people to join the conversation. Moreover, there is a risk of overlooking firms which are already on transformative paths, or assigning small and local, say, food producers in the same not-degrowth group as destructive and exploit-ative corporations simply because both are technically for-profit businesses.

Existing degrowth literature that addresses conventional organisations invites firms to transcend (go beyond or abandon when it becomes possible) the profit motive and focus on satisfying human needs in such a way that seriously considers humans, non-humans, and nature (Nesterova, 2020a). Ontologically speaking, humans are em-bedded within nature, and nature's and humans' wellbeing are inextricably linked. Thus, the call for treading as lightly on the earth as possible is not unfounded. Social entities (including firms) are also parts of a broader society, which is inescapable (Hei-degger, 2001; May, 2007). Hence, the calls to act in a pro-social manner are also not without grounds. Such calls are grounded in a hopeful and optimistic view of human nature: inherent human goodness is assumed, whereby we naturally exhibit concern for the world around us and for each other (Sayer, 2011). Embeddedness within society also means that a firm faces real and often powerful structures and systems of soci-ety. Capitalist structures and imperatives (e.g., growth, competition) are all-perva-sive (Buch-Hansen et al., forthcoming)[2]. At the same time, constellations of structures within which a firm operates differ and depend on, for example, its size, type, indus-

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[1] It is important to transcend binaries, such as all good/all bad, degrowth/not degrowth and see firms in non-binary terms, as combining various characteristics. In my field work I notice that many firms, de-spite technically being for-profit organisations, are concerned with the state of the world and actively transform their business operations (see also Flagstad & Johnsen, 2022). Their practice is often imper-fect and conflictual. Businesspersons are often aware of this. In other words, they are not necessarily "bad people" focused solely on profit seeking or serving capitalism. They are as human as anybody else and play multiple other roles in society (parents, friends, activists).

[2] For instance, capitalist organisation of society imposes the need to borrow and repay with interest. Even if one can identify examples of firms which started small in a capitalist society and never had to borrow, or indeed the founders had enough resources to avoid borrowing (Nesterova, 2020b), such ex-amples are not common.

try, and location. For these reasons, it is best to see the relationship between a firm and degrowth as a *process* of navigating existing diverse societal landscapes towards a more sustainable future rather than seeing all firms as agents of capitalism, thus entities working against degrowth. Examples of firms on journeys that entail being parts of capitalism while also trying to act responsibly and navigating the meaning of responsibility are common. In relation to such imperfect and often conflicted but real situations, responsibilities need to be discussed as ideas and ways for firms to be in the world in a genuinely sustainable manner.

Normally, responsibilities broadly concern humans and nature. Responsibilities towards humans may include responsibilities towards employees, humans involved in supply chains, communities both in proximity and far away, and to customers. Responsibilities towards nature may include considering a firm's consumption of resources, carbon emissions and other negative effects on nature and non-human life. Noting such responsibilities may take shape of a list rather than a holistic vision. In this article, I propose a different kind of responsibilities that tends towards a holistic vision rather than a list of responsibilities: responsibilities towards places. The philosophical lens that I use in the article is that of *deep ecology*, while the philosophy of science underlabouring this exploration is critical realism. Deep ecology is an environmental philosophy associated most notably with the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (e.g., Naess, 1989, 1995a, 2002, 2016). This non-anthropocentric philosophy seeks to bring to the surface and celebrate the interconnectedness of humans, non-humans, and nature. Deep ecology is a response to the unfolding and intensifying ecological degradation, a call to re-consider our relationships with the world, to deviate from exploitation and adopt self-realisation (of humans and non-humans) as a key principle of our being in the world.

Yet another category of responsibilities may seem unnecessary in the already complex world. My proposal, however, is based less on adding something else to the responsibilities towards nature and humans, but more on seeing nature and humans differently: in terms of a unique intersection and *gestalt* where parts form an irreplaceable whole in a place (Naess, 1989)[3]. Thus, responsibilities towards places are not a sum of considerations towards humans and nature. Looking into what a place is highlights why this is so and why it is a unique and complex meeting space for considerations towards humans and nature rather than a mere sum. The concept of a place is central to geography (Clarke, 2013; Cresswell, 2009; Tuan, 1974, 1979, 2001), and this is the science from which I derive the understanding of a place. In geography, the concept of a place goes beyond mere location (Tuan, 1979). It is a space where location meets meaning to a person and communities. Place can be defined as a "particular location that has acquired a set of meanings and attachments" (Cresswell, 2009, p. 169). Thus, a place is emergent from, and is related to, a location, but is not reduceable to it. The need to consider responsibility towards places arises from the opposition towards

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[3] One example given in Naess (1989) is skiing. The topography, the temperature, the sense of place, the person and their activity come together, and nothing can be subtracted. Subtracting any of those would do damage to the wholeness of the situation.

the homogenising and standardising tendency of capitalism (Koch, 2012) and seeing diversity as valuable and worth preserving (Naess, 1989). Place is also central to the philosophy of deep ecology (LaChapelle, 1995; Naess, 1989, 2002, 2016). In fact, this philosophy proposes that there is no clear separation between a person and a place, and even that it is best to refer to people-places rather than to people, as if people could be place-less like atoms in an economics' model world (Naess, 1995b; Naess, 2016)[4]. Even more precise could be to refer to the "unity of place, [hu]man, and beast" (Turner, 1995, p. 42).

It appears timely to contemplate responsibility towards places in light of calls within the field of degrowth for localisation and deep transformation (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023; Paech, 2012, 2017; Trainer, 2012, 2014). Such responsibility would prevent localisation from becoming merely a matter of geographical distance and would make it a matter of contemplation, mindful action, and applied philosophy. As for the much needed transformations, contemplating responsibility towards places would provide another strategy or a way to think about a firm's own place in the world and its role in making the world a better place. Contemplating responsibilities towards places can facilitate a dialogue between CSR scholars and degrowth scholars. Initially, such dialogue may seem unlikely. To degrowth scholars, the concept of CSR is risky because of its association with a mere greening of existing destructive capitalist structures rather than transformation thereof. CSR scholars themselves acknowledge that there are risks of rendering CSR meaningless, of co-opting the concept or reducing it to green marketing (May et al., 2007). Moreover, CSR targets business, which is often seen as a questionable form of organisation in an ideal degrowth society (Nesterova & Robra, 2022). Putting degrowth and CSR in dialogue is indeed not without risks. While the aim of such dialogues should be opening new spaces for CSR and for teamwork, there is a risk of diluting degrowth and thus rendering it meaningless.

Yet, the necessity of a dialogue and teamwork between different fields, though they come with challenges, fears, and perhaps mutual distrust, arises from the fact that ecological and social degradation is unfolding and it is essential to take a proactive role in addressing it urgently and *collectively* (Buch-Hansen et al., forthcoming; Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen, 2019). Furthermore, places are real. They exist and have meaning to real people. Places exist in capitalist societies and are subject to capitalist mechanisms. A more pragmatic approach of CSR scholars who tend to focus on concrete and diverse cases in the real world, without shying away from controversial (from a

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[4] For instance, Naess (1995b, pp. 230-231) discusses the Norwegian government subsidised resettlement of people from "the arctic wilderness" to "centers of development". He notes that "people, as persons, are clearly not the same when their bodies have been transported. The social, economic, *and natural setting* is now vastly different. The objects with which they work and live are completely different. There is a consequent loss of personal identity. They now ask "Who am I?" Their self-respect and self-esteem has been impaired. What is adequate in the so-called periphery of the country is different from what is important in the so-called centers. If people are relocated, or rather, transplanted from a steep mountainous place to the plains below, they also realize (but too late) that their home-place was a part of themselves and that they *identified* with features of that place. The way of life in the tiny locality, with the intensity of social relations there, has formed their personhood".

degrowth perspective) entities such as firms, can be helpful and useful. Utopian de-growth imaginaries can thus meet knowledges of concrete cases, practices, principles, struggles, and coping strategies. In this article, a degrowth society, i.e., a society where humans live in harmony with nature, each other and the self is seen as something to strive for. Yet another reason for contemplating CSR in relation to degrowth can be framed as follows. It is better to reclaim concepts, seek transformative potential in them and reflect on how they can become transformative rather than discount con-cepts, phenomena, and fields of knowledges as incompatible with degrowth or as nec-essarily mainstream or capitalist[5]. It is often so that a genuine concern for nature and others resides within scholars affiliated with different disciplines and sub-disciplines, including CSR.

The aim of this article is not to propose an ideal or final way to enact responsibility towards places, but rather to start a much-needed conversation and teamwork, and provoke reflection on how this responsibility can be enacted, why places are essential to be mindful of, and what it means to be responsible as a firm in a degrowth society. The remainder of this article is organised as follows. Section 2 contemplates degrowth and specifically a degrowth society. It draws attention to nuance and loose ends exist-ing within the field of degrowth and to localisation, which is a prominent idea within degrowth. It ends with suggesting that a location (which is at the heart of localisation) houses places. Section 3 then discusses what places are and, in more detail, why being responsible towards places should be contemplated in relation to transformations. Section 4 proposes several ways to incorporate responsibility towards places in organ-isations, diving deeper into contemplation on the value of *ecosophy* development to firms. Section 5 concludes and suggests several initial steps forward.

DEGROWTH SOCIETY

Often, students ask me to paint a picture of a degrowth society, as the concept of degrowth comes across as too abstract to them. It is always a challenging request. A degrowth society is difficult to define and describe briefly, though multiple ideas ex-ist (e.g., Paech, 2012, 2017; Trainer, 2012). Simply, a degrowth society is one living in harmony with nature (i.e., it is genuinely ecologically sustainable) and which is inter-nally harmonious (just, class-less, solidaric). However, this does not say enough. The word degrowth itself does not tell us much about the idea behind it either, especially to those outside the academic and activist fields of degrowth. This word indeed can evoke images of decline and sacrifice. While decline and sacrifice is not what degrowth scholars have in mind when referring to degrowth, rather the opposite (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023), due to degrowth still not being part of everyone's vocabulary, it is understandable why the concept provokes a sense of discomfort and even oppo-

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[5] It appears that new spaces are being opened for a dialogue between CSR and degrowth, as well as for more "radical" possibilities for CSR. For instance, Matthews et al. (forthcoming) is an encyclopaedia of CSR which has entries on degrowth and doughnut economics. While this should not be taken as a sure sign of CSR becoming aligned with degrowth, it may be an opening for new theorising, knowledge sharing, discussions, and teamwork.

sition. Moreover, there is not one correct way to think about degrowth, there is no such a thing as "the degrowth". There is also no single universally accepted theory of change towards degrowth amongst degrowth scholars and activists. This depends on a scholar's ideological, philosophical, political, and other commitments and their own journeys as scholars and human beings. Coming from a perspective of critical realist social ontology, I assume that both agents and structures play a role and are interrelated (Bhaskar, 1989; Collier, 1994). In this perspective, agents transform and reproduce social structures, while social structures constrain and empower agents. Social change arises from transformation of detrimental social structures and reproduction of the ones that are nurturing and supportive of flourishing. While both agents and structures are important, it is only agents (human beings) who can act (Danermark et al., 2002). Their actions depend on many factors such as one's circumstances (e.g., culture, age, position in various hierarchies).

The concept of degrowth has evolved over time and many scholars, activists and practitioners have contributed to the field. The term degrowth itself implies reduction and signifies, based on the arguments from the science of ecological economics, the need to reduce matter and energy throughput of the global human economy (Spash, 2011). Such reduction is needed for humans to be able to live in harmony with nature. Reduction of matter and energy throughput should go hand in hand with wellbeing arising from universal satisfaction of vital human needs (Büchs & Koch, 2017) and from increasing the quality of life rather than the standard of living (Naess, 2002). While this (the need for reduction in humanity' overall matter and energy throughput combined with satisfaction of everyone's needs and increase in the quality of life) is something that all degrowth scholars and activists would agree on, the details of what a degrowth society would look like and how to get there are far from clear. For instance, it remains unclear how a degrowth society can arise from the current capitalist society to which a growth imperative is central. In this society, firms are subject to the growth imperative, and stepping away from it tends to lead to bankruptcy (Gordon & Rosenthal, 2003). Though non-growing firms exist, oftentimes they are specific cases such as very small, family or lifestyle businesses. A solution to this *systemic* issue is not simply asking firms to give up on profits, or labelling all firms as not-degrowth, but rather for civil society, the state, and businesses to work collectively to step onto a path alternative to capitalism (Buch-Hansen et al., forthcoming). And this stepping on the alternative path may look different for different entities, especially considering diverse constellations of social and natural structures within which they are embedded.

Buch-Hansen (2021) outlines the following pillars of degrowth: democratic transition, ecological sustainability, and (social) justice. I rely on this summary due to its all-encompassing approach and a positive message. It puts gentleness and care at the centre of degrowth pursuits rather than presenting degrowth as a missile word (for critique of this approach, see Drews & Antal, 2016). *Democratic transition* implies that a top-down transition is not an option. To avoid authoritarian approaches in a hypothetical situation of ecological collapse, it is best to plan in advance and participate in transformations in the here and now. A space for a dialogue is needed, and it is es-

sential to avoid de-humanising those who may be coming from different perspectives, to avoid the us-versus-them situation (Gibson-Graham, 2003). After all, no one can claim to possess "the truth". Every piece of knowledge is subject to critique (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2021). *Ecological sustainability* could be achieved via deviation from (material) wealth towards wellbeing, i.e., leaving materialistic pursuits behind and instead focusing on satisfaction of vital needs and creation of non-material wealth which contributes to wellbeing (Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2019). This resonates with arguments made outside the degrowth discourse, for instance, by scholars of humanism (e.g., Fromm, 2002, 2013) and deep ecology (e.g., Sessions, 1995). The step from wealth to wellbeing is one where the word degrowth becomes somewhat misleading. For instance, growth, which is an inherent quality of life processes (Fromm, 2013) can be spiritual and moral (Nesterova, 2021a). This kind of growth is encouraged. Growth is also encouraged in many other ways, such as in desirable sectors (e.g., organic agriculture, renewable energy), in satisfaction of needs (i.e., in access to the goods and services produced by nature and humanity), in solidarity, in identification with other beings (Naess, 1989). *Social justice* presupposes that everyone's wellbeing is important, everyone's vital needs must be satisfied, and every human being should have access to the same opportunities. For this reason, eco-social policies began to receive particular attention within the degrowth discourse (Koch, 2018). Without justice and redistribution orientated policies degrowth risks being an elitist project for those people who already have access to land, social networks, higher education, knowledges, philosophical education and philosophical tools, support, opportunities to experiment with different lifestyles and modes of being, and so on. Some degrowth scholars (including myself) may add to the justice element of degrowth a consideration of non-human beings. This includes animals and other forms of life such as trees, rivers, and lakes, which are seen as beings in their own right rather than mere features of ecologies and landscapes (Naess, 1995a, 1989; Nesterova, 2021a). This does not mean that non-human beings must be treated in the same way as fellow humans. But it does imply that other beings should have a right to self-realisation and that humans should use the earth's resources primarily, if not only, to satisfy their *vital* needs (Naess, 1989, 1995a, 2006). Here alternative uses could be considered. From the perspective of other beings having a right to self-realisation, land could be used by humans to grow food but not for golf courses. Growing food, though it does mean using the land that could be inhabited freely by diverse trees, insects, and other beings, is a necessity. Golf courses are not.

Degrowth scholars and activists seek strategies to achieve a degrowth society. In sum, such a society is hoped to be achieved by questioning and countering the pursuit of infinite economic growth and materialistic mode of being to reach ecological sustainability and by welcoming growth in material consumption where necessary, as well as growth in moral agency. A degrowth society hence becomes an ideal to strive for. In this ideal society, economic growth is no longer central, consumption is sufficient, everyone's vital needs are satisfied, and materialistic mode of being is replaced by a spiritual mode of being. In the view of Naess (1989), this mode of being is indeed one that deserves to be described as rich, opulent, and luxurious. Such adjectives

clearly do not refer to material wealth, status, possessions, and their accumulation. In a degrowth society, multiple issues associated with the modern times, such as the feeling of emptiness and affectlessness (May, 2007), are hoped to fade away in favour of a meaningful and fulfilling, joyful being (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023).

A degrowth economy, i.e., an economy as part of the society described above, is localised (Paech, 2017; Trainer, 2012, 2014). Paech (2017) offers a list of transformation steps, all of which imply a localised rather than globalised economy. The steps include (1) sufficiency, or focusing on the essentials and discarding the rest, thus also freeing time (2) subsistence or deviation gradually from the industrial production system, (3) regional economy, (4) producing new goods only when old ones cannot be reused, (5) institutional innovation or reform in the use of land, money, in types of currencies used and types of organisations and lifestyles. Similar views have also been expressed by others making a clear link between localisation and degrowth (see e.g., Nesterova, 2021c; Trainer, 2012, 2014, 2020). Considering that a much more local mode of being will likely be part of a degrowth society, it is imperative to look more closely at localisation, what it means, entails, what it may look like. Localisation, by definition, concerns locations. A location is something that can be pointed at on a map and defined using a geographical coordinate system. It is a geographical given. Zooming in on a location allows us to observe that it is much more than a geographical given. And this brings us to places. Places, as outlined in the Introduction of this article, are spaces where locations meet meaning and attachment. Within the widely read environmental literature, if one is looking for examples of a place, the relationship between Arne Naess and Tvergastein in Norway (Naess, 2005) or Henry David Thoreau and Concord in the United States can be considered (Thoreau, 2016). One may also rely on one's own senses and experiences. For instance, one may point at the location where one's house is, yet this does not tell us much, if anything at all, what home feels like to the person. The concept of a place invites us to think in much broader and deeper terms than the concept of location. It can be assumed that not merely locations would play a significant role in a degrowth society, but so will places. Perhaps a key to successful localisation in a degrowth society lies within seeing, honouring, and treating locations as places. In what follows, I will connect places and firms.

PLACES AND RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARDS THEM

In the globalised world, places become concealed. Global market, global supply chains, multinational corporations, transnational scales and transactions, homogenisation, and standardisation make locations look alike (Høyer, 2012). In the market-based system, places have become commodities, allowing governments to "acquire vast stretches of land in a foreign sovereign nation-state as a sort of extension of [their] own territory—for example, to grow food for [their] middle classes—even as it expels local villages and rural economies from that land" (Sassen, 2014, p. 2). All these tendencies are, in the view and words of Naess (2016), place-corrosive. They obscure and downplay people's existing (and potential) and intimate relationships with places. Places are parts of humans themselves and our identities, memories, stories, experiences,

and aspirations (Convery et al., 2012; Naess, 2016). Places are shaped and reshaped by humans (Naess, 2016; Tuan, 1974). This led Naess (2016) to suggest that there is no clear boundary between people and places and that such dualism needs to be transcended. The concept of a place may seem alien in a globalised society or a matter of private attachments and experiences, rather than something to be honoured by economists and business scholars. This is not to say that places have not been utilised, for instance, for branding and marketing purposes, or that marketing and branding strategies have not been utilised in relation to places (Campelo, 2017)[6].

While using and being dependent on products and technologies from places where one does not belong, as is the case in the globalised world, changes the sense of belonging to a place, it does not eliminate the sense of belonging completely (Naess, 2005). The same humans who are seen as consumers and producers by economists are beings experiencing deep connections with places and others within them. Places have a material reality which can be felt, sensed, and experienced (Page, 2020) but are not mere containers or conditions. They are relational (Massey, 2005), i.e., "constituted by relationships" (Baldwin, 2012, p. 207) between the space, individuals, groups, and non-human beings. Places are not necessarily small (Buell, 2000), they can span expansive locales. For instance, in the case of nomadic communities and transhumance (Archer, 2018; Palladino, 2018), a place may not be a town, but rather a whole region. Thus, responsibility towards places should be a broad concept able to handle both small scale places (such as people's attachment to home) and large scale places such as forests (consider, for instance, reindeer herding).

Firms affect places in multiple ways. When they are present in locations, they affect places since those locations have meaning and are sites of dwelling and attachment to someone, be it humans or non-humans. Multinational businesses may homogenise places, while small and local firms may preserve or create diversity. Localisation is an alternative to globalisation and homogenisation which is more in line with respecting, understanding, and preserving places. Considering how important places are, responsibilities towards places should be considered seriously by scholars interested in societal transformation and CSR. Responsibilities towards places require deviation from universalising practices and policies. They require attentiveness, context-sensitivity, and deep conversations with local communities instead.

Smallness of a firm can contribute to its success in practising responsibility towards places (Nesterova, 2020b; Trainer, 2012). In other words, responsibilities towards places may be much easier to enact in smaller rather than large firms. In this case, it would be important to consider which products and services can be produced locally by small firms, and how these products can be affordable and accessible to all. Moreover, governments can support people in starting, for instance, their own artisanal and craft enterprises. Such small entities are more flexible in their approach and more sensitive to their surroundings due to decisions arising within the firm itself rather than from

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[6] This can go both ways. Places can both be utilised for branding and marketing, and thus capitalised on, and marketing can be used for places and even sustainability purposes. For instance, governments and local firms can promote local, seasonal food.

the parent organisation and its management. Many small firms are artisanal producers, lifestyle, and family businesses with existing deep connections with the places in their geographical locations. Many small firms employ local people, rely on local knowledges, and use local resources. But to simply propose that all production should be or can be carried out by small scale producers, especially in the short term of the transition towards a degrowth society, is unrealistic. In complex and emerging social systems, it is impossible to predict what exactly the future will look like (Collier, 1994; Lawson, 2007, 2019). This implies that there could come a time where the techno-industrial complex diminishes and all production is carried out locally and at a small scale (Heikkurinen & Ruuska, 2021; Skrbina & Kordie, 2021). However, that time is not now. Large firms and large-scale services exist and depend on other large firms, and they need to become more responsible now and step on transformative and self-transformative paths. To suggest that such firms must not exist does not suffice. One option is for large firms to offer more autonomy to their constitutive parts which can develop a better understanding of the places they affect, and to implement flat hierarchies to offer more autonomy to humans within these firms.

IMPLEMENTATION OF RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARDS PLACES

Incorporating practices of responsibility towards places requires attentiveness to places by a firm. Responsibilities towards places are not something a business can outline and enact once. Rather, being responsible is a process. Practising such responsibility is something that a firm as a community of humans should constantly enact, reflect on, and ultimately internalise as part of its philosophy of being in the world. While such tasks may seem daunting and distracting in the world where a firm navigates already complex and hostile capitalist system, genuine awareness and attentiveness towards places can make a firm's existence in a particular place more authentic and positive for humans, non-humans, and nature as well as for businesspersons themselves. For instance, attentiveness can contribute to better relationships with and between employees and a more trusting and long-lasting connection with local communities. Apart from humans, non-human beings should be considered. While places certainly have meaning to humans, places are also important to other beings to whom places are homes and habitats (Nesterova, 2022a, 2022b). Thus, responsibilities towards places go beyond responsibilities to human individuals but incorporate responsibilities to other beings as individuals who are valuable in themselves and should have a right for self-realisation (Naess, 1989, 2016). Responsibilities towards places may require a decision not to be present in some places, even if such presence results in economic benefits (Nesterova, 2022b). For instance, when considering expanding into new regions it is essential to study and respect the fine balance of life in those regions, including indigenous groups and their existing rhythms of life, technologies, and cultures. Yet, where presence is already a fact or is appropriate, a firm should strive to become part of the community of life in a certain place.

The first step on the journey to develop a culture where responsibility towards places features prominently may be deviating from the relentless profit seeking whenever

possible. This call is central in the literature connecting degrowth and business (Nesterova, 2020a, 2021b). However, for many firms profit, though desirable, already is not the sole goal of their existence. The goal may be to make some profit while living well in a certain area, to maintain a certain lifestyle such as living in a sparsely populated, idyllic area (Keskitalo, 2008). Thus, more than calling for deviation from profit seeking needs to be considered. A firm can consider itself to be an agent of change and encourage contemplation and discussions on the meaning and significance of places. Such discussions can involve employees, business owners and managers, local communities, municipalities, activists, and academics. They can be part of contemplating our modes of being in the world as humans. For instance, Fromm's (2013) distinction between two modes of being in the world, one is having and the other one is being, can be useful. The first mode relates to the culture of the modern society where the focus is on possessions and having more (see also Fromm, 2002). The other mode relates to a philosophical approach to life, of appreciating aspects of existence in themselves. For example, one may appreciate a flower without plucking it, which is a metaphor for our attitude to nature in general (Fromm, 2013). Since being is not abstract, but rather unfolds somewhere, Fromm's distinction encourages one to consider places in a more serious way rather than see them as interchangeable or subject to homogenisation. And while such contemplations may seem naïve and insignificant in comparison to the scale of change required in society, change depends (though does not come from solely) change in our modes of being in the world and how we relate to and with it (Bhaskar, 2000).

The pathways outlined above are directions of thinking but not parts of a particular system of thought. However, incorporating responsibilities towards places is also possible in a more systematic manner. A firm can develop its own ecosophy, following the guidance of deep ecology and its theorist Arne Naess (Naess, 1989, 1995, 2002, 2016). An ecosophy is a position or a viewpoint that concentrates on (one's) relations to nature which houses fellow humans and non-humans, all valuable in themselves and deserving of self-realisation (Naess, 1989). Seeing an ecosophy as a viewpoint makes it clear that an ecosophy is different to philosophy (all-inclusive field of study), to a philosophy (all-inclusive position or a viewpoint) and to ecophilosophy (field of study concentrating on relations to nature). In the words of Naess (1989, p. 37), we "study ecophilosophy, but to approach practical situations involving ourselves, we aim to develop our own ecosophies". This practical value is what makes ecosophy valuable for actions in the real world. Importantly, *sophia* (insight or wisdom) is contrasted by Naess with *logos*. Naess (1989, p. 37, Italics original) explains that sophia "need not have specific scientific pretensions as opposed to 'logos' compound words (biology, anthropology, geology, etc.), but all 'sophical' insight should be directly *relevant for action*. Through their action, a person or organisation exemplifies *sophia*, sagacity, and wisdom—or lack thereof. 'Sophia' intimates acquaintance and understanding rather than impersonal or abstract results". Arne Naess named his own life's philosophy Ecosophy T where T is the first letter of the place in Norway (Tvergastein) with which Naess had a special, important, and nurturing connection. He encouraged every person to develop their own ecosophy where the letter T could be replaced by any

other letter indicating the place which would have a special meaning to that person (Naess, 1995a, 2016). Thus, a firm can transcend the more common techniques of, for instance, writing CSR statements. Instead, it can contemplate in a deep, sincere, and non-hierarchical dialogue between employees, managers, customers, and other stakeholders its own ecosophy x where x denotes the place where a firm is located. In this process the firm itself may become a place of ecological awareness and knowledge, and a meaningful place for the humans who sustain its existence. Development of a firm's own ecosophy can be done via relying on the key elements of Naess's Ecosophy T (Naess, 1989). They include (a) the environment (b) self-realisation (c) derivation (e.g., of practices from the more fundamental principles) (d) identification (of the selves with nature, of our needs with nature's needs, (e) intrinsic value, (f) depth.

(a) The environment. The environment is not to be seen as merely something that surrounds a firm, but something from which the firm, its employees, customers, products, services, suppliers and distributors are inseparable. This realisation would manifest not only in principles and practices of the firm, but also in a long-term vision which is relational rather than a human-in-environment one (Naess, 1989). Since the firm is somewhere (e.g., in Helsinki or in Ångermanland), place can receive particular attention. Thinking in terms of a place makes considerations towards the environment more manageable as Snyder's quote in the beginning of this article suggests.

(b) Self-realisation. Self-realisation is not understood in the narrow terms of one's ego (e.g., business owners' personal aspirations) but in terms of rights of humans and non-humans for self-realisation in their own ways, in places from which they are inseparable. Because deep ecology recognises the right of non-humans for self-realisation, it is essential that humans take from nature only what contributes to satisfaction of our needs rather than wants and desires (Naess, 1995c). This has significant implication for production and even existence of various industries such as advertising, fast fashion, fast furniture, some forms of tourism in the future. Human self-realisation, such as that of workers, within firms may be constrained by the dynamics of ownership and hierarchy. Workers may be powerless and be treated as replaceable. Such dynamics are not supportive of their flourishing and enactment by them of the ideas discussed in this article. Opposing principles such as flat hierarchies and worker ownership can, on the contrary, be empowering.

(c) Derivation. Here, practices of a firm would derive from more fundamental principles such as the principle of self-realisation. Concrete practices, if more fundamental principles have been understood, become common sense (Nesterova, 2021a). Apart from self-realisation, as the recent definition of degrowth in the beginning of this article suggests, at the heart of degrowth are gentleness and care.

(d) Identification. This key element, similarly to self-realisation, challenges the

narrow notion of the ego and the self. Here, the self (of business owners and, though metaphorically, of the firm) is invited to be expanded or transcended far beyond the ego and include the Self, i.e., nature and everything it houses, including fellow humans. For instance, if businesspersons identify themselves with employees, i.e., feel empathy and compassion towards them, better working conditions would be ensured. Identification with nature and non-humans would lead to using resources frugally and treading lightly on the earth.

(e) Intrinsic value. To assume that self-realisation and identification can or even should be pursued, businesspersons' and employees' worldviews need to incorporate the assumption that humans, non-humans and nature have intrinsic value, i.e., they are valuable in themselves. Hence, firms would be motivated to destroy as little value on the earth as possible, i.e., production would be orientated towards genuine needs satisfaction.

(f) Depth. In the Introduction to Naess's ecosophy T (Naess, 1989, p. 12), David Rothenberg writes the following. "It is the work of the philosopher to go deeply into problems and situations which may at first seem simple or obvious, digging out the roots to reveal structures and connections that will then be as visible as the problem first seemed to be easy. This is why a philosophical ecology is a deep ecology." This may provide a guideline for businesspersons to navigate their business's principles, practices, and vision in relation to places where they are. To go deeply into problems and situations should no longer be the domain of the philosopher, but rather of everyone who participates in bringing about a more sustainable society.

These key elements are abstract. However, they become more concrete and realisable if each of the elements is related to a place, its nature, and its inhabitants. It is important to note that enacting responsibilities towards places should be a collective effort of firms, the civil society, and the state. Some firms may already be in a position to develop their own ecosophies due to their existing concern for the state of the world (see e.g., Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018 for an example of a certified B Corp), though a lack of certification is not a sign of a firm being irresponsible or unable to develop an ecosophy. For instance, many small and locally embedded firms may find certifications expensive.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE CONTEMPLATIONS

The domain of responsibilities towards places has been proposed as a space for discussion and collaboration. Such collaboration can unfold between degrowth scholars and scholars of CSR and be aimed at understanding how firms can be deeply responsible, starting with a firm's development of its own ecosophy. The dialogue may initially be a challenge since degrowth and CSR may be seen as opposing perspective, degrowth as a call for reduction in economic activities and for completely revising the nature of those activities and CSR as a tool for reproduction of the capitalist system and as

something firms have to do to stay relevant in the society awakening to the situation of ecological and social degradation. However, such approaches to both degrowth and CSR are reductionist, and both sides are contributing to this. To CSR scholars, degrowth is unrealistic and utopian. To degrowth scholars, CSR is just another marketing tool used in and by the capitalist system to avoid any real deep transformation. Often, degrowth scholars remain sceptical of business in general as a capitalist profit and growth seeking entity, and of businesspersons as active and intentional participants in such dynamics. However, this does not have to be the case. The field of CSR can be seen as a space with diverse views, some of which, at least in personal conversations, are sympathetic towards degrowth. It does not have to be viewed merely and necessarily as a tool of greening capitalism. Moreover, businesses are diverse, and businesspersons are different. Not every businessperson is akin to a CEO of a large and destructive corporation. Businesspersons are humans. For us to believe that change towards a degrowth society is possible, and humans are willing to explore and enact responsibilities towards places and intentionally develop ecosophies, requires a positive view of human beings, shared by humanism, critical realism, and deep ecology. An alternative to opposition approach is required if change is to be achieved. An appropriate guiding ethos for a collaboration between degrowth and CSR can be what Gibson-Graham (2003, p. 67) call an "ethos of engagement": an "ethos of engagement is an aspect of a politics of becoming, where subjects are made anew through engaging with others. This transformative process involves cultivating generosity in the place of hostility and suspicion." To deepen the ethos of engagement, one may turn to Fromm (2013) and his distinction between having and being. He proposes that instead of focusing on having (knowledge, status, information, position, connections), a more productive way is to focus on being, on shedding the ego and letting go of preconceptions. This mode of being, according to Fromm (2013) gives rise to the other party's shedding of the ego and likewise letting go of preconceptions.

As is often the case with contemplating transformations, multiple questions remain. They necessitate future investigations. I invite contemplations on the following. Developing of ecosophies relies on human capacities such as self-transcendence and compassion towards others (humans and non-humans). It thus appears timely to discuss the question of human nature in relation to degrowth and transformations. While the model of "economic man" is (rightly) refused by degrowth scholars, existing assumptions seem fragmented. More attention needs to be paid to (all) humans' abilities and desires for relatedness, self-transcendence, empathy, fellow-feeling, right action, and how various spaces can be nurtured for such abilities to thrive. Studies are needed to understand how responsibilities towards places currently are and can be enacted in diverse firms in the future, from micro to large firms, in different industries and in different contexts. Difficult and contentious cases such as large firms need to be addressed. It seems important to go beyond safe and obviously degrowth compatible small-scale producers, such as highly localised food production carried out by alternative organisations, and consider how currently degrowth incompatible entities can step on paths of change. In relation to the scale and diversity of firms playing a role in enacting responsibilities towards places, it is important to understand the so-

cial dynamics of enacting (and *feeling*) these responsibilities within organisations. The roles of founders, managers, employees need to be captured, as well as what prevents responsibilities towards places from being manifested, and what empowers their manifestation.

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