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https://doi.org/10.34024/prometeica.2025.32.20365

TRANSCENDENCE AS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED?

DIGGING INTO THE HUMAN SCALE DEVELOPMENT THEORY

¿LA TRASCENDENCIA COMO UNA NECESIDAD HUMANA FUNDAMENTAL?

Explorando la Teoría del Desarrollo a Escala Humana

A TRANSCENDÊNCIA COMO UMA NECESSIDADE HUMANA FUNDAMENTAL?

Explorando a Teoria do Desenvolvimento em Escala Humana

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Recibido: 04/04/2025
Aprobado: 22/07/2025

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore transcendence as another fundamental human need within the framework of Max-Neef's Theory of Human Scale Development (THSD). While Max-Neef and other Latin American researchers, such as Carlos Mallman, have discussed various aspects of human needs, the explicit inclusion of transcendence as a fundamental human

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need in the framework HSD remains unresolved. However, Max-Neef's work provides foundations for reflecting on and potentially integrating transcendence into his original matrix of fundamental human needs. Given the current socioecological crises and global disasters such as wars, migrations and pandemic, there is an urgent necessity to reconsider our relationship with the planet and all forms of life on it. Transcendence, whether understood as transcending the ego or reconnecting with nature and life in its deepest sense, it is increasingly recognized both within and outside academia as a crucial dimension of the human experience. To support the argument for transcendence as a human need, this paper draws on insights coming from THSD, cognitive science, indigenous cosmologies, spirituality, and (eco)philosophy. Methodologically, the study employs a conceptual analysis with a hermeneutic approach to elucidate the nuanced understanding of transcendence in order to consider it as a universal human need.

Keywords: transcendence. human scale development. fundamental needs. Manfred Max-Neef.

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar la trascendencia como otra necesidad humana fundamental dentro del marco de la Teoría del Desarrollo a Escala Humana (TDEH) de Max-Neef. Aunque Max-Neef y otros investigadores latinoamericanos, como Carlos Mallman, han abordado diversos aspectos de las necesidades humanas, la inclusión explícita de la trascendencia como una necesidad humana fundamental en el marco de la TDEH sigue siendo un tema no resuelto. Sin embargo, el trabajo de Max-Neef proporciona bases para reflexionar sobre la posibilidad de integrar la trascendencia en su matriz original de necesidades humanas fundamentales. Ante las crisis socioecológicas actuales y los desastres globales, como guerras, migraciones y pandemias, surge una necesidad urgente de reconsiderar nuestra relación con el planeta y con todas las formas de vida en él. La trascendencia, ya sea entendida como la superación del ego o la reconexión con la naturaleza y la vida en su sentido más profundo, es cada vez más reconocida, tanto dentro como fuera del ámbito académico, como una dimensión crucial de la experiencia humana. Para respaldar el argumento de la trascendencia como una necesidad humana, este artículo se basa en aportes provenientes de la TDEH, la ciencia cognitiva, las cosmologías indígenas, la espiritualidad y la (eco)filosofía. Metodológicamente, el estudio emplea un análisis conceptual con un enfoque hermenéutico para esclarecer la comprensión matizada de la trascendencia y considerarla como una necesidad humana universal.

Palabras clave: trascendencia. desarrollo a escala humana. necesidades fundamentales. Manfred Max-Neef.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo explorar a transcendência como outra necessidade humana fundamental dentro do marco da Teoria do Desenvolvimento em Escala Humana (TDEH) de Max-Neef. Embora Max-Neef e outros pesquisadores latino-americanos, como Carlos Mallman, tenham abordado diversos aspectos das necessidades humanas, a inclusão explícita da transcendência como uma necessidade humana fundamental no contexto da TDEH ainda permanece uma questão em aberto. No entanto, o trabalho de Max-Neef fornece bases para refletir sobre a possibilidade de integrar a transcendência em sua matriz original de necessidades humanas fundamentais. Diante das crises socioecológicas atuais e dos desastres globais, como guerras, migrações e pandemias, surge uma necessidade urgente de reconsiderar nossa relação com o planeta e com todas as formas de vida nele. A transcendência, seja compreendida como a superação do ego ou a reconexão com a natureza e a vida em seu sentido mais profundo, é cada vez mais reconhecida, tanto dentro quanto

fora do meio acadêmico, como uma dimensão crucial da experiência humana. Para sustentar o argumento da transcendência como uma necessidade humana, este artigo baseia-se em contribuições da TDEH, da ciência cognitiva, das cosmologias indígenas, da espiritualidade e da (eco)filosofia. Metodologicamente, o estudo emprega uma análise conceitual com uma abordagem hermenêutica para esclarecer a compreensão detalhada da transcendência e considerá-la como uma necessidade humana universal.

Palavras-chave: transcendência. desenvolvimento em escala humana. necessidade fundamental. Manfred Max-Neef.

Introduction

Why reflect on transcendence today? Tuning into any news channel suffices to reveal the multitude of local and global conflicts and socioecological disasters threatening life around the world. The context appears desolate and often hopeless. However, proposals from both within and outside the scientific milieu offer ways to regain hope. One such proposal is the Human Scale Development (HSD) theory, along with its matrix of fundamental human needs, introduced by Professor Manfred Max-Neef, recipient of the Right Livelihood Award in 1983. This framework provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on the complexities of our time and envision alternative worlds.

The HSD theory, with its matrix of fundamental human needs, is a philosophical framework that prioritizes life (human and non-human), challenging the epistemological, ontological, and ideological foundations of conventional development paradigms. For Max-Neef (1991), effective development occurs when the quality of life for the human population improves, meaning that every individual has the opportunity to meet their fundamental needs.

Following the work of Groppa (2004), it is important to emphasize that the topic of human needs is not central in classical economic development studies.

> The methodological oversimplification inherent in the notion of homo economicus obscures a broader anthropological and ethical perspective. Economists must no longer focus merely on needs; rather, they must examine the actions undertaken by agents. Needs, in this view, reveal personal preferences, and there is no room for value judgments. Consequently, the theoretical definition of need is abandoned in favor of a purely descriptive analysis of observed behaviors (p. 1).

In Latin America, during the 1960s and 1970s, studies on poverty conducted by the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) incorporated the concept of needs, in particular the notion of basic needs. This concept includes factors such as the education level of the household head, school attendance for children, and access to adequate housing. These elements complemented the traditional income-based definition of poverty and helped to capture what these scholars identified as structural poverty. From a different perspective, the concept of human needs was also explored by anthropologists and psychologists, as noted by Groppa (2004). Undoubtedly, the topic of human needs remains an open and dynamic debate, generating criticism from various areas of scientific inquiry and political domains. And the HSD framework is not freed from those criticisms.

In contrast to the oversimplification of the conventional economic thinking, Max-Neef argued that human needs are finite and universal (similar), beyond cultural and historical contexts. These needs include: 1) subsistence, 2) protection, 3) affection, 4) understanding, 5) participation, 6) idleness, 7) creation, 8) identity, and 9) freedom. What varies are the means by which these needs are satisfied, which Max-Neef refers to as “satisfiers”. These satisfiers are shaped by the cultural, economic, and political contexts. In other words, the needs are finite and universal, and the satisfiers are culturally determined.

This understanding of human needs "should be the starting point for analyzing any type of development" (Groppa, 2004, p. 17). It also captures the complexities and interrelations of human needs, which requires

moving beyond linear analyses. Indeed, this is a systemic approach that views human needs not only as deficiencies but also as potentialities inherent in human beings, contributing to the achievement of what Max-Neef referred to as human-scale development. Following the arguments of the Chilean economist, needs will be understood simultaneously as deficiencies and as potentialities, allowing us to break the vicious circle of poverty. From this, it follows that the way in which needs are understood, as well as the role and attributes assigned to possible satisfiers, are absolutely essential for defining a development strategy (Max-Neef, 1991).

Within this analytical context, the notion of transcendence is subtly embedded in Max-Neef's work, and our aim is to bring it to the forefront, making it the object of our reflections. While Max-Neef did not explicitly include transcendence in his original matrix of fundamental human needs, he acknowledged its potential future relevance. As he stated, “it is likely that in the future the need for transcendence, which is not included in our proposal as we do not yet consider it universal, will become universal like the other needs” (1991, p. 27). Later, in his book, *Economía Herética* (2017), Max-Neef engaged with metaphysical and spiritual dimensions as a pathway to overcoming the disenchantment of the modern civilizational project, its anthropocentric and utilitarian rationality, and its failure to foster the plenitude of life.

Now, over forty years after Max-Neef received the Right Livelihood Award, our goal is to integrate transcendence into his matrix. We aim to construct an argument that weaves together insights from science, philosophy, spirituality, and indigenous worldviews with the nascent yet powerful notion of transcendence present in Max-Neef's work.

Methodologically, our approach seeks to answer key questions: Why is it important to reflect on transcendence today? Why is it necessary to connect transcendence to the concept of human needs and development, which is now so closely tied to the material worldviews and analyzed through economistic lenses? In this search, we draw on perspectives from both inside and outside the academic domain, recognizing that Max-Neef is one of the few intellectuals in Latin America who has incorporated philosophical, mystical and indigenous worldviews, as well as scientific viewpoints into his analysis of development and human needs. Under this framework, we engage with a conceptual-hermeneutic approach that enables us to explore the notion of transcendence from multiple perspectives. In this endeavor, we aim not only to identify connections between these perspectives and Max-Neef's proposal but also to construct a foundation that supports our argument for integrating the concept of transcendence into the matrix of fundamental human needs.

To develop our argument, we begin with a broad conceptual overview of the notion of transcendence. Next, we briefly engage with Max-Neef's perspective on transcendence, followed by insights from cognitive sciences, indigenous cosmologies, spirituality, and (eco)philosophy. Drawing on this hermeneutic framework, we construct an argument that both strengthens and refines the concept of transcendence as cautiously articulated by Max-Neef. Finally, we propose an integration of transcendence within the Max-Neef´s matrix of human fundamental needs, concluding with some final reflections.

1. Transcendence: a general conceptual overview

Based on the literature analyzed, we argue that the notion of transcendence challenges the dualism inherent in Western culture, which sets the ontological and epistemological foundations of anthropocentrism—a worldview that not only separates humans from nature but also positions them in a dominant role (Merchant, 1980). In the literature, the term "transcendence" is often used interchangeably with mystical and spiritual states, all associated with transcending the boundaries of the ego (Dein, 2020). For example, Durkheim (1969) discusses the dissolution of ego boundaries and the cultivation of transcendent experiences; Dunbar (2013, 2014) identifies elements in music and dance that facilitate these states; Winkelman (2013) links shamanism to self-transcendence; and Low (2015)

explores transcendent experiences in healing practices. Gorelik suggests that "transcendence can evoke a […] feeling of connection with someone's environment and the beings that inhabit it" (2016, p. 16).

Regarding spirituality, a term that comes close to transcendence, various authors contend that it serves as a pathway through which individuals or groups communicate with the sacred. As anthropologist Llamazares notes, the sacred is a fundamental aspect of consciousness, not something external or distant; it embodies "the impulse toward the transcendent and the quest for meaning" (2022, p. 37). Brazilian theologian Boff (2001) argues that religion channels the spiritual search through dogmas, rites, myths, and celebrations. However, spirituality transcends institutional confines, with religion ideally serving the needs of spirituality. Through rituals, art, and symbols, individuals can seek answers to fundamental questions about life and existence (Llamazares, 2022). Engaging with spirituality is a subjective and transcendental experience, essential to the human condition that can enhance well-being and quality of life (Silva & Sousa, 2017), beyond cultural and geographic contexts.

Building on this general overview, we explore how the notion of transcendence is articulated across the various approaches examined in this paper.

2. Transcendence in the Framework of Max-Neef

Tracing the concept of transcendence in the work of Max-Neef, its origins can be found in the collaborative efforts with his colleague Carlos Mallman at the Bariloche Foundation (Argentina) in the 1970s. Mallman proposed transcendence as an additional category of need related to the satisfaction of self-realization (Groppa, 2004). However, in their discussions, the researchers noted that transcendence was already embedded in meditation, a satisfier linked to the need for understanding, while also stimulating the satisfaction of other needs such as idleness creation, and identity. Max-Neef, on the other hand, argued against incorporating transcendence as a separate category, asserting that it "transcends all dimensions of human existence" (Groppa, 2004, p. 21). Thus, transcendence emerged as a transversal dimension encompassing the other nine human needs in the matrix.

Later, in his book *La Dimensión Perdida* (2008), Max-Neef offered new insights on the notion of transcendence. In a reflective manner, inspired by his surroundings, he criticized the gigantism of modern society and the idea of endless development. This critique addresses worldviews in which transcendence is deemed unnecessary in modernity. Llamazares (2022) describes this as a manifestation of the "wounds of the West," where "the ablation of the sacred and the denial of an immanent implicit order in the invisible emerges, either in the cosmos or within our psyche" (p. 30). For Max-Neef, this immanent order exists within his tiny cosmos, in his garden, at his hands:

> (...) inside my house, on the surrounding sidewalks or in the corners of my garden... I have rediscovered my true dimension. I have found that the greatness of the challenge lies in sticking to this dimension. Only what is my measure can be my measure (2008, pp. 9-10).

With this insightful perspective, Max-Neef (2008) criticized modern technocratic society, which has fostered a disconnection between humans and nature, posing significant threats to the planet. Similarly, Llamazares (2022) argues that with modernity mechanisms emerge to shape "our way of thinking, leading to fragmentation between mind and world, spirit and matter, humans and nature" (p. 30). This fragmentation contributes to contemporary crises, including ecological imbalances, often referred to as a civilizational crisis (Leff, 2024).

From our perspective, in *La Dimensión Perdida* (2008), Max-Neef expands upon his original ideas regarding transcendence, which, at the time of writing *Human Scale Development* (1991), was not yet recognized as a universal need to be included in the matrix. However, influenced by Buddhist philosophy, Max-Neef introduced dimensions such as happiness, described as "the product of a total sense of connectivity with our world, with nature, with our communities and their people, and with our culture and spiritual heritage" (Max-Neef, 2014, p. 3).

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Approaching the work of Max-Neef, Gómez Rico (2018) has integrated spirituality as a tenth need, proposing an innovative circular format for the human needs' matrix. This, indeed, reinforces Max-Neef's original idea that there is no hierarchy among human needs; all of them are complementary. More recently, Chávez (2022) conducted research implementing Max-Neef's matrix of fundamental needs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the small community called "El Manzano", in the Bio-Bio Region of southern Chile. In El Manzano, residents chose to practice permaculture (Mollinson, 1988), feeling that their way of life was threatened by the pandemic. In this context, transcendence emerged as another fundamental human need. As Chavez notes:

> They find transcendence in their possibility of living the life they want to live, based on the connection with nature—a lifestyle imbued with meaning through actions promoting the regeneration of interactions that sustain life in the territory (p. 40).

Despite Max-Neef's initial recognition of the relevance of transcendence, we argue that he inadvertently constrained his intuition, leaving a circle unclosed. Nonetheless, his perspective opened up pathways to understanding life, humanity, and nature as a complex and intertwined system that requires more than scientific knowledge. As he stated, "we need a transdisciplinary approach that fosters dialogue between scientists and those outside the academic world, an approach that combines reason with intuition, matter with spirit, ethics with aesthetics, and beauty with truth" (Max-Neef, 2005, 2017). In this light, Max-Neef laid the groundwork for advancing the concept of transcendence as a fundamental human need, rather than equating it solely with meditation or other needs such as understanding, idleness, creation, or identity.

To progress in our search, we must understand transcendence as the need of integrating ourselves with others, both human and non-human. In this line, we address transcendence within various frameworks, recognizing that in spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Indigenous philosophies, transcendence is regarded as a vital human need, connecting us to the essential conditions that sustain our existence and provide a profound sense of life. In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of several frameworks that have explored the dimension of transcendence and, directly and indirectly, have influenced the thinking of Max-Neef.

3. Cognitive Science

From the perspective of cognitive science, transcendence encompasses inquiries related to the origin and purpose of life. As Max-Neef stated, "we live in a world full of answers and very few questions. I would like, therefore, to begin with perhaps the most profound questions: why do we exist? What is the purpose of life?" (Sampaio, 2005, p. 7).

Humans, as members of the mammalian class, are inherently social beings. They have developed an unprecedented capacity for intelligence, characterized by the ability to learn from established patterns and engage in complex cognition (Mithen, 2015). The brain, as part of the central nervous system, has evolved to culminate in the neocortex, which specializes in advanced functions such as language. Additionally, humans possess an expanded consciousness that enables them to navigate the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future (Damásio, 2005).

The evolution of the human brain is attributed to what is termed naturalistic intelligence, which facilitated a diet comprised of higher-quality vegetarian foods selected from their environment. This dietary shift helped reconcile the diminishing functionality of the intestines, as reduced food intake released metabolic energy that supported brain evolution (Mithen, 2015). However, the consumption of meat has also played a pivotal role in strengthening social relationships (Cavalli-Sforza, 2001).

In terms of human sociability, there exists a close relationship with emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to interpret non-verbal behaviors, essentially, empathy (Damásio, 2000; Goleman, 2021). Social interactions reinforce language development, fostering cognitive fluidity in the composition of

consciousness and cultivating in humans the conception of art and spirituality (Mithen, 2015), which constitutes the essence of the human mind (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2017).

Transcendence, therefore, may arise from the perception of energy captured by neural receptors (which constitute the brain), commonly referred to as the senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) which mediate the interfaces between humans, as physical beings endowed with minds, and their environment that is nature (Lent, 2004).

As Max-Neef recognized, along with the researchers engaged in the debates at the Bariloche Foundation, transcendence was embedded in the practice of meditation, which enables individuals to transcend their limitations. Psychoanalytic perspectives suggest that meditation facilitates detachment from the "ego," which, particularly in Western traditions, is often identified as the "I." In Buddhist traditions, human suffering arises from the challenge of distancing oneself from this ego, which serves as the core of personal identity. This detachment is also associated with the notion of the subject's death (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2017). Under this framework, transcendence may be characterized by the reconnection of humans to nature, from which they should never have been disconnected. This perspective also challenges the dualism between the knowing subject and the object (reality). The subject's intent to understand reality positions them as part of the same substance, suggesting a fundamental interconnectedness, as proposed by the phenomenological maxim (Husserl, 1970).

4. Cosmologies of indigenous peoples

In the cosmology of indigenous peoples, transcendence manifests through relational ways of being, knowing, and doing, forming socio-natural and collective configurations centered on the whole. This perspective can be found in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu,* in the Latin-American conceptions of Mother Earth, such as *Pachamama*, *Ñuke Mapu*, or *Uma Kiwe*, among others.

According to Bermúdez, the notion of *Pachamama* articulates three interconnected categories: "space, time, and identity, although *Mama* makes reference to the matrix sustenance and potency that shelters the beings in nature, among them the human beings (2017, p. 107). For the, Aymara scholar Apaza Huanca (2019) the concept of *Pachamama* has transformed the understanding of the environment from an anthropocentric to a biocentric perspective, fostering mechanisms to defend the rights of nature. According to Walsh, Apaza Huanca understands *Pachamama* or Sacred Mother Earth as a non-Western epistemology,

> A system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence (…). This notion is part and parcel of the cosmology or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala" (2010, p. 18).

Additionally, indigenous jurist Nina Pacari explains that within the Andean worldview,

> All beings of nature are imbued with an energy called *samai*, rendering them living entities. Consequently, elements such as rocks, rivers, mountains, and plants are regarded as alive, experiencing feelings such as happiness and sadness akin to human beings (Tola, 2018, p. 29).

Viewing indigenous cosmologies through the lens of Human Scale Development (HSD) theory prompts a reevaluation of the very notion of development. In this line, Estermann (2013) argues that for indigenous peoples, development cannot be quantified through numerical indicators, instead it can be assessed by considering the quality of life expressed through the concept of *Buen Vivir* (*sumak kawsay; sum qamaña; ivi maräei; küme mogen*), a conception that encompasses all beings—animals, plants, minerals, stars, spirits, and deities, living in symmetrical relationships (Walsh, 2012).

Thus, indigenous cosmology challenges the cognitive limitations of anthropocentric views on development, which is frequently understood as solely human process. Within indigenous conceptions of development, spirituality is a fully integrated dimension, one that permeates the daily lives of

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individuals (Silva & Sousa, 2017), transcending any institutional domain such as religion. As Osorio Calvo argues, we need to recognize that indigenous spirituality is:

> (…) an understanding of human and social realities linked to the relationship with nature. For the indigenous people, nature is Mother, the Earth is Mother, the elements of the natural environment that occur in the territory are entities of a material and spiritual order that give life, health and harmony (2017, p. 185).

This worldview also recognizes death as an integral part of life, reflecting a unique understanding of existence of all inhabitants in the planet. In this line, Bermúdez (2017) asserts that while human existence and nature represent the reality in which all occurs, existence itself is ephemeral, marked by a beginning and an end, drawing an eternal cycle. Within Max-Neef's HSD theory, traces of indigenous cosmologies can be identified as this framework encourages a rethinking of contemporary development epistemology, fostering dialogue between diverse visions and cosmologies, either western or non-western.

5. Spirituality

If humans are integral to nature, then the spiritual dimension is inherent in biocenosis (*biocönose*), that is, the social community formed by living organisms in a given environment (Möbius, 1880, p. 721). This argument aligns with Chardin's (2007) concept of the noosphere, envisioned as a layer within the biosphere, resulting from increasing complexity that fosters new forms of consciousness. These developments reflect the inner movements of the human spirit, which seeks to harmonize our humanness with evolving historical contexts (Cousins, 1985).

Humanity's distinct advantage lies in our 'subjective awareness,' which often leads us to perceive ourselves as separate from the biophysical world. However, the significant forces within that universe do not operate upon us as formidable outsiders. Instead, as Lévi-Strauss suggests, such forces colonize us "in the interests of the silent world whose agents we have now become" (1961, p. 390). Claude Lévi-Strauss brings us back to Max-Neef's vision of his garden: it is not humans who make sense of themselves through nature, but rather nature making sense of itself through human experiences. In this sense, we can argue that Max-Neef's explorations of his garden shift our orientation to become receptive to the world's sensuous expressions. This approach resonates with the notion of 'global spirituality' proposed by Cousins (1985) and finds ontological and epistemological grounding in the works of Tim Ingold (2017) and Douglas E. Christie (2013). As Christie notes:

> Contemplative life was understood by the ancient monastics as a way of seeing (or to extend the metaphor of monks often did, as a way of listening, touching, tasting or smelling). *Theoria* refers to a way of seeing, which includes but also transcends what is visible on the surface. It is a way of seeing deeply into the whole of reality (…) and situating oneself with integrity in relation to this whole (2013, p. 142).

Rather than simply knowing, individuals are called to understand, setting aside the preconceived notions that everything is already known. Both Christie (2013) and Ingold (2007) agree that a fundamental deviation in contemporary society is its obsessive reliance on quantification and mechanistic approaches to daily problems. This technical objectivity undermines the moral perspective that a spiritual engagement with ongoing worlding processes could provide.

Related to spiritual engagement we find the Barniaudy and Delorme's (2024) analysis of ecospirituality, which they define as "the mutual cross-fertilization of ecology and spirituality." Spirituality, as they understand it, refers to,

> A subjective experience that is transformative of personhood, interpreted as intensifying fundamental dimensions of existence (namely meaning, the essential, the sacred, the ultimate, etc.) and opens up to forms of transcendence (p. 50).

Emphasizing the political and transformative potential of spirituality, Barniaudy and Delorme (2024) argue that diverse spiritualities connected with nature can foster ecospiritual practices guiding

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individuals to a radical environmentalism. In this analysis, the authors chose to focus on the notion "ecospiritual practices" because:

> Though they imply entering into relation with a dimension of profundity and mystery situated beyond grasp, they are embodied in a sentient experience of the world (…) Exploring this mystery becomes 'spiritual' practice from the point at which attention is consciously turned toward the discovery of what phenomenology calls an 'ecology in the first person,' which calls for a renewed understanding of our relation to the Earth based on an experiential and relational process (p. 53).

The notion of ecospiritual practices is often criticized as being apolitical and individualistic. However, as Barniaudy and Delorme (2024) assert, the ecospiritual practices encompasses an "ecology in the first person", which must be understood as a relational process that transcends individuality. It calls for a renewed understanding of and a sense of connectedness with our planet and life in all its manifestations.

From another perspective, the ecospiritual practices can be better understood by examining the communitarian feminism of Mayan women in Guatemala and their reveling concept of "body as territory" (Busconi, 2018; Cabnal, 2017). "Body as territory" is both a relational ontology and a political category, articulated amidst the struggles of indigenous women in Latin America against colonial, patriarchal, racist, and capitalist violence. This violence has historically targeted the lives of women and nature, as well as their bodies and territories. In analyzing the *Tzk'at*, a network of ancestral healer of Mayan women, self-proclaimed communitarian feminists from Iximulew-Guatemala, Cabnal asserts:

> All of them are related to the political action of territorial and body defense, including the fight for the right to water, the defense of rivers, forests, and mountains, food autonomy, ancestral knowledge, midwife grandmothers, as well as resistance to hydroelectric plants, mining, and violence against women, girls, and boys (2017, p. 101).

From the perspective of Mayan women in the *Tzk´*at, defending the territory involves recognizing the body as a contested territory by, both, ancestral and colonial patriarchy. In this context, healing becomes a political and collective process aimed at dismantling the multiple forms of oppression that position women's bodies and nature as the primary objects of patriarchy. To dismantle these oppressions, it is necessary to "start from the original cosmogony to decode it and reveal how it operates on the bodies of indigenous women and within the community" (Cabnal, 2017, p. 102). In this sense, the healing of women at the *Tzk´*at can be understood as both ecospiritual and political practices (Barniaudy & Delorme, 2024), insofar as their spiritualities are interwoven with collective life and struggles.

> Healing is both a personal and political act, one that women interpret as a way to protect both their bodies and the earth. The Network of Ancestral Healers supports defenders in their emotional and spiritual recovery processes through a communitarian feminism and territorial approach (Cabnal, 2017, p. 103).

In essence, by renewing our sense of connectedness with Mother Earth and the understanding of all living things, we cultivate a profound feeling of wonder and a mystical awareness of oneness, connecting us to earlier mystical experiences while also revealing something new (King, 1985). The quest for a harmonious relationship between human communities and the world constitutes the transcendental act that, as Max-Neef (1986) proposed, could pave the way for the regeneration of life. This regeneration fosters a sense of spirituality that, while devoid of supernatural transcendence, emphasizes a being-in-relationship, recognizing that we are part of the environment and that our actions should resonate with the pace of life in connection with, both, human and non-human beings.

6. The (Eco)Philosophy

Eco-philosophy represents a philosophical approach that seeks to reconcile aspects of modern Western culture that have historically been divided: human/nature; human/non-human beings; spirit/matter. Central to this eco-philosophy is a moral principle, the intrinsic value of life and its diverse manifestations on Earth. This principle is expressed in the Max-Neef's call for a profound respect for life as the essential way for transcending the anthropocentric worldview. As he stated, "Without nature

there would be no life, and without life, the entire Cosmos would be meaningless" (Max-Neef 2017, p. 179).

The intrinsic value of life is a principle found in various philosophical traditions, including Buddhism and Deep Ecology, both of which have significantly influenced Max-Neef's thinking. These philosophies advocate for the perspective of "one world that is home to all known life," as noted by Henning (2002, p. 13). Within this framework, any genuine aspiration for transcendence must strive to overcome the dualisms of human/non-human and human/nature. According to Max-Neef, such dualisms lay at the heart of conventional economistic developmental theories, which underpin predatory economic practices such as consumerism and material accumulation, very often extending beyond basic human needs.

To overcome this dualism it is necessary to challenge speciesist relationships that grant humans the right to discriminate and exploit non-human beings based on a presumption of human´s superiority (Ryder 2017). Max-Neef was notably concerned with speciesism, particularly in relation to his observations of Bhutanese society, which prioritizes happiness as a developmental goal. However, he emphasized that this is not merely any form of happiness.

> It manifests as a commitment to service for others, recognizing that genuine happiness cannot coexist with the suffering of others (…) It involves an awareness of other sentient beings, encouraging, for example, practices such as organic agriculture to prevent the death of millions of microorganisms through pesticide use, and calling for the prohibition of cruel industrial animal production (Max-Neef & Smith, 2014, p. 3).

From another perspective, happiness encompasses the moral principle of reverence and respect for all forms of life, as stated by Aldo Leopold (1949) in his *Land Ethic*, as well as in the deep ecology of Arne Naess. Leopold posits that a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to a plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for fellow members and also respect for the community as such (Leopold, 1949, p. 174). Similarly, Naess introduced the concept of the "ecological self," referring to a self-realized human who extends care and love to all beings, both human and non-human. This self-realized individual exists "in" and "with" the vast community of others (Olmedo & Ceberio de León, 2022).

Caring and loving nature, according to Max-Neef, is inseparable from adopting an organic worldview. A perspective from where he had established a close connection between the economy, society, and nature, where the moral principle of respect for life and an organic worldview fosters a deeper understanding of our existence and how we can construct a society in harmony with nature. When confronting the ecological crisis, the questions Max-Neef raises transcend mere ecological inquiry and delve into philosophical issues such as: What is the place of human beings in nature? and What should be the limits of human intervention in the biosphere? These are the types of philosophical inquiries that encourage us to integrate transcendence as a fundamental human need.

7. Transcendence as a Human Need and Synergistic Practice Satisfier

As previously mentioned, Max-Neef did not dismiss the possibility that transcendence could emerge as another universal human need (Max-Neef, 1991). His visionary and yet unfinished conception of transcendence drew upon a variety of influences, including German Romanticism, Buddhist philosophy and the worldviews of indigenous peoples and peasant communities in Latin America. Additionally, in the latter part of his life, he was notably influenced by the Papal Encyclical "Laudato Si." (2015).

Max-Neef expressed particular admiration for Bhutanese society, where policymakers proposed Gross Domestic Happiness as both a national indicator and a developmental goal. This initiative aligns closely with Max-Neef's perspective that happiness should serve as the ultimate aim of development. He argued that happiness is not contingent on external material conditions; rather, it is rooted in a sense of interconnectedness among humans, nature, and all forms of life on the planet. As Jigme Thinley, former Prime Minister of Bhutan, articulated in relation to Gross Domestic Happiness,

> This approach involves "transforming humanity into a less destructive force [...] considering the mysterious web of interdependent relationships that is now being confirmed through scientific studies" (Thinley, 1999, p. 18).

From this understanding, happiness inherently involves transcending the modern duality of human-nature that underpins predatory economic models, leading to relationships with nature that can result in various forms of entrapment, manifesting as feelings of dissatisfaction. Escaping this metaphorical prison represents a form of transcendence that, if achieved, can lead to the better satisfaction of all other needs.

In Latin America, dualism was imposed since colonial times through violent power dynamics, alienating humans and cultures from nature, which became viewed as an adversary to be dominated. This dualism also established a dichotomy between "civilized-modern-white-Europeans" and "barbarians-indigenous-mestizo-backward-Latin-Americans," a divide that today manifests as a racialized anti-environmentalism (Zhouri, 2010) that perceives social diversity—crucial for the co-generation of biodiversity—as a threat.

Conversely, certain practices transcend this dualism. Agroecology exemplifies a practice that fulfills food needs (fruits and vegetables) while safeguarding soil and surrounding ecosystems. This approach synergistically satisfies the need for transcendence, as it embodies care and respect for nature, ensuring future generations inherit healthy soils and ecosystems. Agroecology operates on principles of respect for all life forms and acknowledges the interdependent relationships between humans and nature. Similarly, the need of transcendence operates synergistically in the worldviews of indigenous people who underpin harmonious existence with nature, where food is acquired sustainably—hunting just enough to eat and harvesting without damaging the land—while engaging in rituals that foster community identity and participation.

In accordance with Max-Neef's philosophy, we posit that the need for transcendence involves reconnection with "others" (communities, nature, and all living beings), while promoting synergistic practices and satisfiers. At the same time, this philosophy prompts us to view socio-environmental conflicts as rooted in the absence of transcendence, which, if addressed, could facilitate social structures that exist in harmony with the natural world.

8. Integrating transcendence in the matrix of fundamental human needs

The concept of human needs and satisfiers is articulated through a matrix developed by Max-Neef (Table 1), who classifies and differentiates these needs into axiological categories that reflect dimensions of life we hold dear: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity, and freedom. On the other hand, the satisfiers that are operationalized within four existential categories that pertain to meaning and purpose in society: being, having, doing, and interacting.

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Table 1: The matrix of Fundamental Human Needs

Existential Needs / Axiological Needs	**Being** [1]	**Having** [2]	**Doing** [3]	**Interacting** [4]
1. Subsistence 2. Protection 3. Affection 4. Understanding 5. Participation 6. Idleness 7. Creation 8. Identity 9. Freedom				

Source: Max-Neef, 1991

Based on the preceding elaborations, we propose that the need for transcendence be recognized as the tenth axiological category, along with a corresponding group of satisfiers linked to the existential categories of being, having, doing, and interacting, as shown in see Table 2.

Table 2: The need of Transcendence (axiological category) and the Satisfiers (existential categories)

Transcendence	**Being**	**Having**	**Doing**	**Interacting**
Synergic Satisfiers	Altruism, spirituality, spiritual health, environmental awareness, animal awareness, love. Social solidarity. Avoiding social elitism. Genteelness	Spiritual literature, spiritual or religious centers, Integral Health (yoga centers), meditation centers, spiritual masters, Spirit guides.	Meditation, Prayer, Pray, Yoga, Volunteering, Follow a spiritual path, Spiritual Exercises, Fasting, Donate, to love, Do rituals, Gentleness Engagement in solidary economic initiatives.	Spiritual groups, Volunteer groups, Meditation and prayer spaces, Solidarity spaces, avoiding vindictive spaces, caring for others

Source: Elaboration of the authors

Regarding the satisfiers, Max-Neef identified five categories: violators or destroyers; pseudo-satisfiers; inhibiting satisfiers; singular; and synergic satisfiers (1991, p. 31).

> **Violators or destroyers**: satisfiers that annihilate the possibility of satisfying other needs. For example, spiritual wars, religious or fundamentalist authoritarianism, which under the idea of spiritual protection destroys all possibilities of satisfying the rest of needs.
>
> **Pseudo-satisfiers:** those that stimulate a false sense of satisfaction. For example, spiritual indoctrination practiced by spiritual gurus, or religious dogmatism that generates a false sense of satisfying the need of understanding, participation and identity.

[1] The column of **Being** refers to personal or collective attributes (expressed as nouns).
[2] The column of **Having** registers institutions, norms, mechanisms, tools (not in a material sense), laws, etc. (expressed from one or more words).
[3] The column of **Doing** introduces actions, personal or collective (expressed as verbs).
[4] The column of **Interacting** refers to the sense of time and space.

Inhibiting satisfiers: those that inhibit the development of other needs. For instance, spiritual paternalism that satisfies the need for protection can obstruct the needs of understanding, participation, freedom and identity. The messianism, which under the need of identity hampers other fundamental needs.

Singular satisfiers: those that aim to satisfy one need, being neutral with the rest of needs. For example, the practice of religion or meditation as a way of individual salvation.

Synergic Satisfiers: those that while satisfying a given need, simulate and contribute to satisfy other needs. One example is breast-feeding, that satisfies the need of subsistence, while contributing to fulfill the needs of affection, protection and identity of the baby with his/her mom.

In this analytical framework, the satisfiers identified for the need for transcendence in Table 2 can be considered "synergistic," as they contribute to the satisfaction of other needs such as participation, understanding, identity, and freedom.

Integrating transcendence into the Max-Neef's matrix requires an analysis of three interconnected levels: ecosystemic, collective (or social), and individual. These levels are linked through a relational ontology that aims to transcend the ontological and epistemological dualism prevalent in Western thought. As Bula articulates, "One who understands their relational nature recognizes that the self does not end at the epidermis, but extends and irrigates through their relationships. Thus, what one understands as 'myself' extends to my social community, my ecological setting, and my planet" (2016. 66). Conversely, the external world infiltrates the subject and the organism, establishing a reciprocal relationship; what occurs in the world affects the individual, and vice versa. What happens to the world, happens to me, and what happens to me, happens to the world. In this context, transcendence embodies a dual overflow: that of an organism that extends into the world while simultaneously being enriched by it. Symbiosis thus emerges as the foundational condition of life.

(i) Transcendence from an eco-systemic perspective

Transcendence intertwined with nature encompasses aspects of existence that human rationality often overlooks. In the various perspectives we have explored regarding the notion of transcendence, we identified elements related to nature and the non-human cosmos. However, with the exception of indigenous cosmologies, transcendence is generally conceived as a post-material existence, in which both personalism and objectification are rendered infeasible, thereby transcending the dualism between subject and object. From the perspective of cognitive sciences, transcendence addresses fundamental questions regarding the origin and purpose of life. In the cosmology of indigenous peoples and spirituality, it manifests in the interconnectedness of being, knowing, and doing, which together form a unified socio-natural configuration. Subjective awareness of biocenosis serves as the pathway through which cognitive and spiritual aspects of perception, action, and consciousness are integrated. In eco-philosophy, human transcendence is viewed as a process of reconnection (religation) with other living beings and their environment. For the Brazilian Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak, transcendence embodies the essence of human existence.

> Life permeates everything: stones, the ozone layer, glaciers. Life flows from oceans to land, crossing from north to south, like a breeze in all directions. Life is the movement of the planet's living organism through an immaterial dimension... Life is transcendence; it defies the dictionary and eludes definition (2023, p. 36).

(ii) Transcendence from a collective or social level

One of the most significant contributions of Max-Neef's proposal lies in its methodological perspective. The Matrix of Fundamental Human Needs is implemented within a participatory action research framework. This qualitative methodology is constructed from a transdisciplinary approach, explicitly grounded in moral principles rooted in biocentrism.

The contribution of this methodological approach is twofold: first, it challenges the positivist conception of science, which Max-Neef criticized in his epistemological writings (2005, 2017; Smith and Max-Neef, 2011). Second, it emphasizes a collaborative research process involving social actors, providing a methodological and conceptual tool for communities to diagnose their own issues and subsequently propose solutions. In this context, the researcher functions as a mediator, channeling the concerns and insights of the community rather than assuming a dominant role.

As Colmenares (2012) notes, this type of methodology encompasses three dimensions: a) a realistic or critical ontology, b) a subjectivist epistemology that incorporates values, and c) a transformative dialogical methodology (103). Within the participatory action research framework, researchers maintain a strong social commitment to societal transformation, fostering the emergence of a new paradigm to address socioecological challenges. A societal transformation that must originate from local community initiatives (Smith and Max-Neef, 2011).

(iii) Transcendence from the individual level

Transcendence is intricately woven into the human experience, representing the surpassing of the ego, to embrace alterity or otherness. It reflects a self that extends itself toward others, encompassing both human communities and the natural world. Transcendence serves as the core of consciousness for individuals seeking to surpass their material and finite existence by fostering care and love for all forms of life. It also offers a path to rediscover the profound sense of interrelation among all life and existence, a connection that contemporary individuals have largely lost (Llamazares, 2013).

9. Final Reflections

Following Max-Neef's initial yet incomplete exploration of transcendence as a fundamental human need, this paper proposes its integration as the tenth need in his matrix. Our proposal was guided by questions such as: Why is it important to reflect on transcendence today? Why is it necessary to connect transcendence to the concept of human needs and development? We understand that Max-Neef's work has paved the way to recognize transcendence as a universal human need within the complex framework of human development, which cannot be fully understood without acknowledging ecological interdependencies. Beyond merely adding transcendence to Max-Neef's original matrix, this proposal also confronts conventional dualistic worldviews, which are central to modern culture, where the sacred was excised, and the immanent order within the invisible cosmos was denied.

In our existence, humans transcend the mere satisfaction of material needs. Yet, we need to recognize our reciprocal relationships with the environment—both nurtured by it and contributing to its vitality. We are intrinsically part of the world as the world interpenetrates our being. Thus, human development is not merely anthropocentric; rather, as Max-Neef suggests, it unfolds on an ecological scale, through the dynamic interplay between humans and their ecological contexts.

However, as we aimed to highlight in this paper, collective discussions regarding socio-environmental and economic conditions are influenced by conventional development model, which must be critically examined. Given the current manifestations of the limitations of our societal model in meeting human needs and fostering the plenitude of life, it is imperative to challenge its philosophical and epistemological structure. Moreover, addressing human needs from alternative perspective can inspire individuals and communities through emancipatory processes and ecospiritual practices that contest the hegemonic worldviews in contemporary society.

Transcendence was explored from various angles, challenging the dualistic and anthropocentric worldviews. As highlighted in cognitive science, indigenous cosmology, spirituality, eco-philosophy, and the work of Max-Neef, nature should not be viewed as human property. Rather, the ecosystem is a network of interconnections that generates the organicity of life. Consequently, when we, as humans, become disconnected from nature, we risk becoming not only insignificant but also pathological beings.

Nowadays, the pursuit of transcendence, as we understand it, represents a quest for new ways of thinking and experiencing our world. By redirecting our focus and reclaiming the sacred and the spiritual, we may transcend our egos and reconnect with life in its deepest sense.

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