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Considering Impartiality and Normativity: On Sustainability, Values, and Education

Ole Andreas Kvamme

Abstract

In this chapter I discuss the position of education in environmental and sustainability education, addressing a main challenge. While education is normative in a fundamental sense, a notion of impartiality is also involved in public education, providing a space for a plurality of opinions, letting students think for themselves. At the same time, the sustainability agenda forms ethical and political demands. How may both of these concerns be accommodated? I explore three approaches that all are sensitive to the concern for impartiality. This is the action competence approach, the pluralistic approach, and an example from American liberal education. Less visible within these accounts is the historical situatedness in a world of crises, the students themselves being a part of the conflictual content to be studied. I point to how the growing interest for the common good in current education policy may be seen as a response to this situation. While environmental and sustainability education should be open with regard to outcome, I propose that the protection of life on earth should be acknowledged as a vital concern guiding purpose, content, and practices. Finally, I identify the relationship between education and democracy as a promising point for further elucidations.

Keywords

Sustainability; values; normativity; impartiality; common good; action competence; the pluralistic approach.

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, the interest is primarily contemporary, addressing the worldwide challenges of ecological crisis, climate crisis, and global injustice.[1] These challenges converge in the sustainable development engagement of nations around the world, currently expressed in the United Nations' *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030),* which focuses on the period

1 This chapter is a revised version of a paper presented at the 13th Enoch Seminar—Nangeroni Meeting this book is related to. I express my gratitude for valuable comments from the colleagues taking part in the discussion. I would also like to thank Scribendi for proofreading the manuscript.

from 2016–2030.[2] Of particular significance is how education is centrally positioned within this agenda. Education is included among the seventeen sustainable development goals of *Agenda 2030* specified in goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."[3] Here education is conceived of as a fundamental human right. Moreover, in target 4.7, education is seen as key for prompting a shift to sustainable societies by ensuring that by 2030 "all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development."[4] There is a similar focus in UNESCO initiatives, first and foremost expressed as education for sustainable development.[5] Finally, and most pervasively, the agenda in itself is calling for *transformation*—as indicated in the title—a fundamental concept and purpose within education and learning theory, involving imaginaries, structures, and practices.

1.1 Impartiality and Normativity

In the following, I discuss some important aspects of the position of education with regard to sustainability, identifying and addressing a major challenge—to live with the tension between the impartiality of public education and the normativity of sustainability. On the one hand, within modern liberal democracies, education is conceived of as impartial in a fundamental sense, respecting the integrity of students and considering indoctrination a major risk for a public school system. A central aim is to let students think for themselves. This approach distinguishes both the Northern European *Bildung* tradition—of which I consider myself to be part as a teacher-educator situated in a Norwegian context—and various strands of liberal education developed within the Anglo-American world. Such a position does not imply that education is without normative assumptions and guidelines. Self-determination is in itself a normative expression included in the school institution's mandate to educate children and youths.

A societal background and rationale for this point of departure is a social order that accommodates various and conflictual notions of the good, calling for justice as impartiality, as the political theorist Brian Barry puts it. He envisages that "nobody is to be allowed to assert the superiority of his own conception of the good over those of other people as a reason for building into the framework for social cooperation special advantages for it."[6] Barry refers to "the problem posed by the irreducibile plurality of

2 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution 70/1: Transforming our World; The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015), https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/.

3 United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming Our World.*

4 United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming Our World.*

5 UNESCO, *Education for Sustainable Development: Towards Achieving the SDGs (ESD for 2030); A Draft Framework for the Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development beyond 2019* (2019), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370215.locale=en. UNESCO, *Education for Sustainable Development. A Roadmap. ESD for 2030* (2020), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802.

6 Barry, *Justice as Impartiality: A Treatise on Social Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 161.

conceptions of the good," also reflected by other political theorists, central to notions of impartiality within liberal education.[7]

On the other hand, the sustainability agenda provides normative demands that are both ethical and political. The ethical dimension is decisive for the concept of sustainable development.[8] Without it, the endeavor simply does not make sense. Some have emphasized the key role of justice in the sustainability agenda.[9] In my own work, I have identified certain environmental ethical values as fundamental in the agenda as it is expressed in UNESCO's global policy of education for sustainable development.[10] Interestingly, these values are not expressed as abstract notions; instead, they are formulated as concerns for specific entities: present human beings, future generations, and the more-than-human world, even including biological and cultural diversity.[11] In short, from an ethical point of view, the sustainable development agenda is about protecting life on Earth in the present and the future. This is how values emerge as significant in this context, aligned with the central concern guiding this anthology.

So, the main issue to be addressed, is how one may provide space for both aspects introduced above—impartiality and normativity—in an updated educational account. This is the key problem that will be explored in what follows. I begin by providing the historical context of the United Nations' sustainability agenda. Then, I turn to some significant contributions within environmental and sustainability education, exploring them as attempts to deal with the problems of impartiality, normativity, and the risk of indoctrination. Finally, I present a proposal about how to cope with the problems in the current urgency related to environmental and climate crises. Here, the values dimension is explicitly addressed, emphasizing the critical and utopian potentials involved.

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7 Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, 161. Another key example is the deliberative account by Gutmann and Thompson. See Amy Gutmann and Dennis F. Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). However, although their distinction between first-order theories and second-order theories aligns with Barry's account, they hold that their own second-order theory is not an expression of impartiality because it involves substantive first-order principles, like religious freedom (136–37); cf. §2.2 below.

8 Peter Kemp, *Citizen of the World: The Cosmopolitan Ideal for the Twenty-First Century*, Contemporary Studies in Philosophy and the Human Sciences (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2011).

9 Erling Holden et al., *The Imperatives of Sustainable Development*: *Needs, Justice, Limits* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Andrea J. Nightingale, Tom Böhler, and Ben Campbell, "Introduction and Overview," in *Environment and Sustainability in a Globalizing World*, ed. Andrea J. Nightingale, Foundations in Global Studies (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3–12.

10 Ole Andreas Kvamme, "Recontextualizing Environmental Ethical Values in a Globalized World: Studies in Moral Education" (PhD diss., Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Oslo, 2020), http://hdl.handle.net/10852/75162.

11 UNESCO, *Framework for the DESD Draft Implementation Scheme* (2016), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000148650.

1.2 The Context of the Anthropocene, Globalization, and Modernity

In the following, I am addressing educational responses to major global challenges in the present, but the chapter is definitely historically situated. The current crises have emerged in an era when human influence on the Earth over time has become overwhelming and pervasive, often designated as the Anthropocene.[12] Decisive is the incredible economic growth that distinguished the decades following World War II, often designated as the *Great Acceleration*. Since then, globalization processes and corporate capitalism have contributed to the powerful increase in human consumption of the Earth's resources and concomitant production of waste, the consequences of which are unjustly and unevenly distributed among the world's population.

The current crises have historical roots in modernity and the processes of modernization.[13] Political scientists Peter Christoff and Robyn Eckersley, for example, in a volume on globalization and the environment, acknowledged the above-mentioned connection between corporate capitalism and ecological crisis.[14] Still, they claimed that the present situation should be examined from a historical perspective going back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Institutional conditions, worldviews, and knowledge regimes have formed a historical context in which present globalization processes and ecological degradation can emerge. They referred to "the rise of instrumental rationality, new scientific inquiry, technological development, the rise of the modern state, industrialization (in both its capitalist and communist forms), and significant changes in culture, identity, and the human relationship to the larger nonhuman world."[15] This is a time of modernization in the history of ideas constituting modernity.

A conspicuous aspect of the sustainable development agenda is that it may both be seen as an expression of modernity and a critique of certain aspects thereof. The agenda communicates a salient belief in the potential of making the world better by employing instrumental rationality, scientific inquiry, technological development, and economic growth. This central tenet of instrumental rationality and progress is however problematized by the acknowledgment of ecological limits, the emphasis on cultural and ecological diversity, and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and in-

12 This epochal concept was introduced within geological science more than 20 years ago, as a formal geological term referring to the period succeeding the Holocene, which started in the aftermath of the last glacial stage almost 12,000 years ago. See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene: An Epoch of Our Making*," Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18. However, in March 2024, the Anthropocene proposal was rejected in a majority vote by the International Union of Geological Scientists (IUGS), among other reasons due to the contentious issue of a definite starting point. The decision is debated, and IUGS also concludes that "the Anthropocene as a concept will continue to be widely used not only by Earth and environmental scientists, but also by social scientists, politicians and economists, as well as by the public at large. As such, it will remain an invaluable descriptor in human-environment interactions."

13 The presentation of this historical context is drawn from Kvamme, "Recontextualizing Environmental Ethical Values."

14 Christoff and Eckersley, *Globalization and the Environment*, Globalization (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

15 Christoff and Eckersley, *Globalization and the Environment,* 9.

sights that question the core beliefs of modernity. The agenda appears to be a complex and ambiguous source for normativity and ethical thinking; however, it invites the highlighting of some values as decisive for the agenda as a whole. In the concluding part of the chapter, I propose a position that acknowledges the significance of the sustainable development agenda while still approaching it from the perspective of questioning and critique.

2. Education and Sustainability: Letting Students Think for Themselves

What is the central purpose of education? The question is of course complex, and the answer requires balancing various needs and requirements of both society and the individual. However, in both the tradition of liberal education as developed within the English-speaking world and Northern European *Bildung* theory, students are encouraged to think for themselves instead of being subjected to specific views on societal and political issues.[16] This type of educational approach is also fundamental to ensuring democracy, as it helps develop citizens who have the ability to think critically.[17] The connection between education and democracy is explicitly drawn or implicitly premised.[18] Students are practicing democracy in the classroom and at the same time preparing for future democratic practices. Educational practices are encouraged that accommodate a plurality of perspectives that students may express, discuss, and scrutinize in social learning processes. From the 1990s, this democratic approach to education has had an impact on environmental and sustainability education distinguished by major contributions that all distance themselves from behavioristic—and supposedly instrumental—versions of environmental and sustainability education.[19]

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16 For the English-speaking world, see Charles Bailey, *Beyond the Present and the Particular: A Theory of Liberal Education*, International Library of the Philosophy of Education 2 (London: Routledge, 2010); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Public Square Book Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). For *Bildung* theory, see Ian Westbury, "Teaching as a Reflective Practice: What Might Didaktik Teach Curriculum?," in *Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition*, ed. Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann, and Kurt Riquarts (New York: Routledge, 2000), 15–39; Rebekka Horlacher, *The Educated Subject and the German Concept of Bildung: A Comparative Cultural History*, Routledge Cultural Studies in Knowledge, Curriculum, and Education 2 (London: Routledge, 2016). For the distinctiveness and interrelations between these two traditions, see Lars Løvlie and Paul Standish, "Introduction: *Bildung* and the Idea of a Liberal Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36 (2002): 317–40, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.00279.

17 Gert Biesta, "*Bildung* and Modernity: The Future of *Bildung* in a World of Difference," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21 (2002): 343–51, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1019874106870.

18 J. Mark Halstead and Mark A. Pike, *Citizenship and Moral Education: Values in Action* (London: Routledge, 2006).

19 Arjen E. J. Wals and Justin Dillon, "Conventional and Emerging Learning Theories: Implications and Choices for Educational Researchers with a Planetary Consciousness," in *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education,* ed. Robert B. Stevenson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 253–61.

In the following, I will study a few of these contributions: Danish and Swedish accounts, which have had a strong impact both in Scandinavia and internationally, and an American contribution, which distinctly exemplifies an exploration of environmental and sustainability education within the field of liberal education. They all have obvious assets and provide insights with regard to environmental and sustainability education. Still, in this chapter, they are also problematized. A limitation here is that I enter these accounts from a particular research interest, examining how the relationship between impartiality and normativity is addressed, not being able to pay sufficient attention to other concerns that they accommodate.

2.1 The Action Competence Approach

The first account to be discussed is the action competence approach, which was developed by a Danish pedagogical research group in the 1980s and 1990s at the Centre for Environmental and Health Education at the Danish School of Educational Studies. The term "action competence" expresses the aim of this environmental education. It is a readiness to act in a way that meets the challenges of a given situation, which was, in the empirical studies that developed and refined this approach during the 1990s, related to local conflicts of interests involving the human use of natural resources.

A key concept here is *action*, which is contrasted with behavior and habit. "In order to be characterized as actions, they must be addressed to solutions of the problem which is being studied."[20] Actions are conscious, intended, and purposive.[21] Through such actions, the modern, autonomous subject emerges, an individual who has the cognitive abilities and capacities for changing the conditions of the world they are inhabiting. The priority of action also distances this approach from previous versions of environmental education that accentuated the acquisition of specific attitudes and behaviors.[22] Two premises—and precautions—are emphasized. First, "It is not and cannot be the task of the school to solve the political problems of society. Its task is not to improve the world with the help of the pupils' activities. These must be assessed on the basis of their formative value and thus according to educational criteria."[23]

The protection of a distinct educational sphere does not exclude normativity. When "dealing with environmental issues, it is necessary to reflect on normative aspects. In other words, that debating ethical issues makes sense."[24] But the role of school is

20 Bjarne Bruun Jensen and Karsten Schnack, "The Action Competence Approach in Environmental Education," *Environmental Education Research* 3 2 (1997): 168, https://doi.org/10.1080/1350462970030205.

21 Finn Mogensen and Karsten Schnack, "The Action Competence Approach and the 'New' Discourses of Education for Sustainable Development, Competence and Quality Criteria," *Environmental Education Research* 16 (2010): 61, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620903504032.

22 Jensen and Schnack, "Action Competence Approach"; see also Wals and Dillon, "Conventional and Emerging Learning Theories."

23 Jensen and Schnack, "Action Competence as an Educational Challenge," 4.

24 Søren Breiting et al., *Action Competence, Conflicting Interests and Environmental Education* (Copenhagen: Danish School of Education, 2009), 47.

here not to inculcate specific values or ideas in the students, making education for democracy the second premise:

> the concern about the environment, health and peace must be coupled with a corresponding concern for democracy. Education for democracy—or political liberal education—is in itself a fundamental educational task, and … we do not believe very much in educational efforts in relation to the environment, health and peace which are divorced from this fundamental perspective.[25]

A central foundation of these ideas is the renewal of the Northern European *Bildung* tradition of the 1970s and 1980s that occurred under the influence of critical theory. In Germany this rethinking involved Wolfgang Klafki and others, under the influence of Jürgen Habermas. The Danish scholars have a foothold in this tradition and also refer to Norwegian philosopher Jon Hellesnes and his elaborations on critical theory with Karl-Otto Apel as the main reference.[26] Critical theory is here conceived of having "an interest in analyzing underlying structures, conditions and preconditions for the appearance of the phenomena" in question.[27] Within this approach, it is vital that teachers and educational systems do not use learning goals to anticipate the outcomes of the educational practices taking place. Although the central aim is action competence, educational process should be fundamentally open. Danish researchers clarified this approach by positioning it within a new generation of environmental education, contrasting it with previous forms based on natural science that were criticized for neglecting the wider social and political context as they focused on behavior modification, reducing the educational mandate to moralism.[28]

In short, according to the action competence approach, the political challenge connected with environmental problems should be dealt with in a democratic education that develops critical and authoritative citizens who are competent to act.

2.2 Second-order Aims in Environmental Education

Interestingly, the above-mentioned Danish researchers, when referring to the *Bildung* tradition in English publications, employed the concept of liberal education, drawing

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25 Bjarne Bruun Jensen and Karsten Schnack, "Action Competence as an Educational Challenge," in *Action and Action Competence as Key Concepts in Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Bjarne Bruun Jensen and Karsten Schnack, Didaktiske studier 12 (Copenhagen, Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, 1994), 4.

26 Klafki, "Characteristics of Critical-Constructive Didaktik," in *Didaktik and/or Curriculum. An International Dialogue*, ed. Bjørg Gundem and Stephan Hopmann, AmUSt 14 (New York: Lang, 1998), 307–28.

27 Jensen and Schnack, "Action Competence as an Educational Challenge," 8.

28 Jensen and Schnack, "Action Competence Approach," 167–68. For a broader discussion on the relationship between the action competence approach and *Bildung*, see Monica Carlsson, "The Twinning of *Bildung* and Competence in Environmental and Sustainability Education: Nordic Perspectives," in *Handbook of Curriculum Theory and Research*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas and Susan Jagger (Cham: Springer). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82976-6_9-1.

a connection between the two conceptions, a pertinent backdrop when now turning the attention to an American context.[29]

In 2012, American scholar Christopher Schlottman published a monograph elucidating the relationship between environmental education and liberal education with a particular emphasis on ethics education. His conception of environmental education was broad, referring to any education addressing the environment. A main point in his account was that environmental education often has contested aims that conflict with central liberal educational values, such as autonomy and the exposure to a diversity of views.[30] Schlottman suggested that environmental education should prioritize critical-thinking abilities. With reference to ethics education, Schlottman encouraged environmental education that promotes reasoning about ethical values, thereby preparing students to understand complex ethical problems.

In his argument, Schlottman distinguished between the first- and second-order aims of education, drawing on political theorists Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, who employed the distinction with regard to democratic theories.[31] First-order theories encounter moral disagreement by rejecting alternatives. Both libertarianism and communitarianism are examples of such first-order theories according to Gutmann and Thompson. In contrast, second-order theories deal with moral disagreement by accommodating first-order theories that conflict with each other. In this way, second-order theories work on a metalevel; they are about other theories. The deliberative democracy famously advocated by Gutmann and Thompson themselves is a prime example of such a second-order theory.

In Schlottman's conception, liberal education is by definition oriented toward second-order aims. He qualified his emphasis on autonomy as a central purpose of education and used autonomy "in contrast to approaches to education aiming for habituation into a specific, first-order moral or cultural set of values, or education more focused on the acquisition of specific behavior rather than independent judgment."[32] His argument does include nuances, stating, for example, that it may be difficult to clearly position environmental ethical values either as first- or second-order aims. Although he problematized sustainability and sustainable development, mainly due to their status as contested concepts, he still acknowledged their function as stepping stones to the form of environmental education he envisaged himself.[33] Schlottman did not positively consider first-order aims to be included in this account, but instead, he focused on second-order aims.

Liberal education as envisaged here may be further illustrated with reference to a key example from political philosopher Harry Brighouse, a thinker who was also a central reference for Schlottman. Reflecting on the moral and political dimensions

29 Jensen and Schnack, "Action Competence as an Educational Challenge," 8.

30 Schlottman, *Conceptual Challenges for Environmental Education: Advocacy, Autonomy, Implicit Education and Values* (New York: Lang, 2010), 6.

31 Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, 126–27.

32 Schlottman, *Conceptual Challenges for Environmental Education*, 26.

33 Schlottman is referring to Bob Jickling, "A Future for Sustainability?" *Water, Air, and Soil Pollution* 123 (2000): 467–76, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005211410123.

of education, Brighouse accented personal autonomy as a primary concern for education, making religion the central example.[34] An impartial religious education is warranted because human beings should be provided with the necessary information to be able to make well-informed judgments regarding various religious or nonreligious positions in life that may contribute to their flourishing. The example demonstrates how liberal society frames the context of liberal education. In Brighouse's conception, the aim to develop democratic competence seamlessly unfolds from his emphasis on autonomy.

With regard to impartiality and normativity as presented in the introduction of this chapter, Schlottman's account of environmental education, in short, distinctly prioritized impartiality as an educational concern, allowing the issue of normativity to be subject to students' critical thinking.

2.3 The Pluralistic Approach to Environmental and Sustainability Education

By 2000, the Swedish National Agency for Education had carried out a national evaluation of Swedish environmental education.[35] The project, which was led by scholars Leif Östman and Johan Öhman, involved both questionnaires and interviews, making practicing teachers the primary informants. They identified three so-called selective traditions of teaching within environmental education among the teachers.[36] In the following, empirical aspects of this study are not considered; instead, it is the scholars normative prioritization and justification of one of these traditions that is of interest. The three traditions are designated as fact-based environmental education, normative environmental education, and pluralistic education for sustainable development. While the fact-based tradition is grounded in established scientific knowledge that determines the teaching content, within the normative tradition, environmental problems are primarily conceived of as a question of prescribed values set by scientists, other experts, and even politicians. Experts clarify what environmental values are to be adopted. Within the third tradition, pluralistic education for sustainable development, environment and development issues are identified as being about conflicts among various human interests.

The issue of criteria is crucial in an evaluation. The researchers stated that there is no objective method of establishing which of the three traditions is to be recommended, but they still expressed the ambition to identify a norm and concluded that "in order for such a norm to be accepted with any validity, it must be done so by the majority of people. Democracy is one such norm. If we agree that one of the most

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34 Brighouse, "Moral and Political Aims of Education," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education,* ed. Harry Brighouse and Harvey Siegel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 35–51, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195312881.003.0003.

35 Skolverket, *Miljöundervisning och utbildning för hållbar utveckling i svensk skola* (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2001).

36 Here, I refer to their conceptualization in their English publication from 2005: Klas Sandell, Johan Öhman, and Leif Östman, *Education for Sustainable Development: Nature, School and Democracy* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2005).

important roles of schools is to reinforce the process of democracy in society, and that the democratic process is fundamental in resolving environmental issues, this norm will accordingly provide a suitable background for evaluating the alternatives in environmental education."[37]

Within this account two conclusions are drawn. First, as an overall purpose, environmental education should promote democracy. Participatory decision-making should be part of educational practices with the aim of letting "students develop into well informed members of society who take an active role in social debates on the environment and sustainable development."[38] Second, in the evaluation of the three traditions, it is the third tradition, pluralistic education for sustainable development, that lives up to the norm and, therefore, is given preference. Here, the democratic process "is an integral part of the education process and is situated *in* education—the critical discussion on different alternatives and their implications is an essential part of education itself."[39] In the two other traditions, either facts or values are presupposed in ways that promote correct attitudes and values, rather than democratic deliberation.

The similarities between the pluralistic approach and Schlottman's emphasis on second-order aims are apparent. The goal of environmental and sustainability education is not to encourage specific values or particular behaviors. Such endeavors belong to fact-based and normative positions, what Schlottman designates as first-order aims. Rather, students should develop skills in societal debate related to conflicts involving various human interests as part of the democratic process. Thus, liberal democracy becomes the central reference, rationale, and legitimization of environmental and sustainability education. The pluralistic approach has been a consistent position within Swedish research, distinguishing numerous international contributions and also engaging scholars from other countries.[40]

3. What Is the Diagnosis of Our Time?

In all the contributions presented here, the privileged educational approach is contrasted with behavioral and instrumental notions of environmental education. All three highlight autonomy as a central aim of education, although Schlottman expresses this concern more explicitly than the Danish and Swedish scholars. They also share an emphasis on the fundamental openness of education. Within the Danish tradition developed in continuity with the German *Bildung* tradition influenced by critical theory, democratic citizenship is more distinctly stressed, but all three posi-

37 Sandell, Öhman, and Östman, *Education for Sustainable Development*, 169–70.

38 Sandell, Öhman, and Östman, *Education for Sustainable Development*, 173.

39 Sandell, Öhman, and Östman, *Education for Sustainable Development*, 177 (emphasis original).

40 Ásgeir Tryggvason, Johan Öhman, and Katrien Van Poeck, "Pluralistic Environmental and Sustainability Education – A Scholarly Review," *Environmental Education Research* 29 (2023): 1460–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2023.2229076.

tions cultivate the open scrutiny and discussion of contentious concepts and issues that emerge in the practices of environmental education.

What is seldom addressed, neither in the Danish action competence approach, nor by Schlottman, nor in the Swedish approach, is the historical situatedness of the educational practices that are considered here. In other words, What is the historical context in which environmental and sustainability education has emerged, and how may this context illuminate the challenges for pedagogy, school, and education?

In an article on *Bildung* and modernity, Dutch philosopher of education Gert Biesta has situated the European *Bildung* tradition within a specific historical context, that of the emerging democratic societies of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[41] Here, educated human beings are not created by adapting to an existing "external order"; instead, they are distinguished by being citizens who can think for themselves. This is the central purpose of *Bildung* constituted both by the needs of a democratic society and the development of the modern self. Biesta's more general point is that *Bildung* is an educational answer to a political question: "We need, in other words, to begin with a 'diagnosis' of our time."[42]

There is no reason to question the democratic foundation and ideal expressed by the three accounts considered here; it should be thought of as a decisive aspect of educational purpose. As previously stated, I include myself within an approach emphasizing the significance of discussion and deliberation in environmental and sustainability education. However, having said that and confronted with the crises in the Anthropocene, the relegation of concerns for nature, climate, and global injustice to first-order concerns leave an impression of something unreal, not attuned to the current and prospective threatening situation on Earth in which we find ourselves. To be more specific with regard to the present climate crisis, it was already in 1992 explicitly acknowledged on the international level in the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* "that human activities have been substantially increasing the atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, that these increases enhance the natural greenhouse effect, and that this will result on average in an additional warming of the Earth's surface and atmosphere and may adversely affect natural ecosystems and humankind."[43]

This claim is a crucial backdrop and legitimization for environmental and sustainability education as developed worldwide. If protecting present and future life on Earth is not included when the overall purpose of environmental and sustainability education is considered, a vital concern is left out. What will be excluded is the normative dimension.

41 Biesta, "*Bildung* and Modernity."

42 Biesta, "*Bildung* and Modernity," 346.

43 United Nations, *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (1992), https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf.

3.1 Reflections on the Common Good

The normative dimension of environmental and sustainability education may be further reflected upon with reference to "the common good." In political discourse, this concept refers to facilities provided to all members of a community in order to fulfill their obligations to care for certain common interests.[44] Education as conceived of within the three accounts considered in this chapter may be said to represent such facilities, which fulfill certain interests, such as ensuring equal opportunities for all regardless of background; pursuing liberal values, including freedom of speech; and fundamentally, maintaining the position of democracy. However, the current global crisis threatens life on Earth in ways that unsettle even stable liberal democracies. While practically all societies have fire departments and police to protect life within their borders, the current challenges are global in scope, calling for international cooperation in the transformation to sustainable societies. Furthermore, the identification of current unsustainable structures and practices also reveals the threats to the common good as positioned inside, as much as outside, individual societies.

The seventeen sustainable development goals come close to a global expression of the common good, facilitated by the United Nations' sustainable development agenda as expressed in *Agenda 2030*.[45] In global education policy, the common good is increasingly used to designate the shared responsibility of the world community faced with the major predicaments of our time.[46] It is illustrated by UNESCO's key report entitled *A New Social Contract for Education* and its call to reimagine education:

> During the twentieth century, public education was essentially aimed at supporting national citizenship and development efforts through the form of compulsory schooling for children and youth. Today, however, as we face grave risks to the future of humanity and the living planet itself, we must urgently reinvent education to help us address common challenges. This act of reimagining means working together to create futures that are shared and interdependent. The new social contract for education must unite us around collective endeavors and provide the knowledge and innovation needed to shape sustainable and peaceful futures for all anchored in social, economic and environmental justice. It must, as this report does, champion the role played by teachers.[47]

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44 Waheed Hussain, "The Common Good," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/common-good/.

45 United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming Our World*. Ole Andreas Kvamme, "Curriculum and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals," in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, ed. Rob Tierney, Fazal Rizvi, and Kadriye Ercikan, 4th ed., 14 vols. (Oxford: Elsevier, 2020), 406–13, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818630-5.03071-2.

46 Heila Lotz-Sisitka, "Utopianism and Educational Processes in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 13.1 (2008): 134–52; Rita Locatelli, *Reframing Education as a Public and Common Good: Enhancing Democratic Governance* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

47 UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education; Report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education* (2021), https://doi.org/10.54675/ASRB4722.

The nation state's framing of citizenship is here transformed into a global notion of the common good that involves the interests of both present and future life on Earth. This is definitely a decisive turn to normativity and values—the report specifically calls for a pedagogy "rooted in cooperation and solidarity, building the capacities of students and teachers to work together in trust to transform the world."[48]

My suggestion is that reflections on environmental and sustainability education in the current situation should consider the turn to values that here takes place, currently impacting education policy, curriculum-making, and educational practices, as well as providing space and conditions for research within the field of environmental and sustainability education. At the same time, there are obviously reasons to problematize and discuss the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and the global policy of education for sustainable development. Exactly because the agenda is undergirded by consensus statements, the acknowledgment of tensions, contradictions, and disagreements that emerge are vital for continuously repoliticizing the field.[49] This concern is central in Chantal Mouffe's critique of efforts to build consensus across differences.[50] It is definitely important to identify those voices that are continuously excluded from consensus. But even such an analysis premises a normative dimension that should be exposed and discussed.

3.2 Acknowledging the Normativity of Environmental and Sustainability Education

In the three accounts presented in this chapter, we have seen that the central educational purposes connect with the development of personal autonomy and the ability to engage with a plurality of voices. These purposes relate to a form of normativity in education: In the Danish and Swedish accounts, they are explicitly embedded in the purpose of education to promote democracy, while in Schlottman's account the concern for democracy is implicitly expressed in the distinction between first- and second-order aims. Second-order aims specified in the promotion of critical thinking unquestionably constitute a normative purpose. In the three accounts, *normativity as a problem* is first and foremost located within versions of environmental education that are not being promoted, associated with the goal of inculcating specific values and behaviors into students. It is in this manner that the accounts considered here defend a notion of impartiality with regard to first-order aims. There are some difficulties with such a take, however. Here, I will identify three interrelated problems. Below, they are presented in a way that forms a larger argument in favor of letting normative concerns play a more central role in environmental and sustainability education.

First, while the scientific evidence of crises is overwhelming, there are certainly disagreements with regard to details, and scientific results are per definition always

48 UNESCO, *Reimaging Our Futures Together*, 50.

49 Louise Sund and Johan Öhman, "On the Need to Repoliticise Environmental and Sustainability Education: Rethinking the Postpolitical Consensus," *Environmental Education Research* 20 (2014): 639–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.833585.

50 Mouffe, *On the Political*, Thinking in Action (New York: Routledge, 2005).

preliminary and subject to continuous correction.[51] None of the three approaches discussed here dismiss climate change and ecological degradation, but without clearly connecting with the normative bearings involved, they risk leaving an impression of pretense, parallel to deliberations on a sinking ship that do not connect with the critical threats to life onboard.

Second, on an individual level, there is a risk of transferring the notion of impartiality, in modernity connected with the school as a public institution, to students, positioning them at a distance from or even outside the societal and ecological context of which they are part. The emphasis on autonomy, which particularly distinguishes the action competence approach and Schlottman's account, may serve such a student ideal not embedded in the web of relationships constituting life.[52] More generally, this is an objection that has been raised to the notion of the modern autonomous self as it emerges in Western history from both communitarian, feminist, and posthuman positions.[53] When it comes to environmental and sustainability education, the concept of autonomy appears as particularly problematic considering the students being part of the content, that is, they are living creatures in the world under threat.[54] As corporeal beings, they share the vulnerability that in fundamental ways distinguish life on Earth. The notion of relational autonomy, as developed among feminist theorists, may be helpful here, emphasizing social and ecological interdependency, demonstrating how the normative dimension has political bearings.[55] Students should be respected not only as subjects to institutional learning but also as young citizens who have an interest in the formation of current policies that will determine their future living conditions.

Finally, in decisive areas, such as the environment and climate, the world is worse off today than in the 1990s, when the United Nations introduced sustainable development as a key concept and strategy. In previous works, I have suggested conceiving of environmental ethical values in the sustainable development agenda from the perspective of critical theory, emphasizing how they emerge within a system that is

51 See the follow-up by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on the climate (United Nations, *Framework Convention on Climate Change*) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services on biodiversity. See United Nations, *The Convention on Biodiversity* (1992), https://www.cbd.int/convention/text/default.shtml.

52 A similar critique is raised by Lysgaard and Bengtsson with reference to Timothy Morton, particularly questioning the emphasis on intentionality in the action competence approach. See Jonas Andreasen Lysgaard and Stefan Bengtsson, "Action Incontinence: Action and Competence in Dark Pedagogy," in *Pedagogy in the Anthropocene: Re-wilding Education for a New Earth*, ed. Michael Paulsen, Jan Jagodzinski, and Shé M. Hawke, Palgrave Studies in Educational Futures (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1453–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90980-2_6.

53 For the communitarian, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). For the feminist, see Martha Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (New York: New Press. 2004). For the posthuman, see Carol Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, Posthumanities 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

54 I have developed this point elsewhere in Ole Andreas Kvamme, "Rethinking *Bildung* in the Anthropocene: The Case of Wolfgang Klafki." *HvTSt* 77 (2021): a6807, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6807.

55 Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

subject to critique.[56] From this perspective, the values are resources for an immanent critique of current policy, one that even involves the sustainability agenda itself. The school strikes for the climate may be considered the prime example of such a critique. In this social movement, while students have left the school institution behind, they emerge as young citizens.[57] Such a take on sustainable development combines an acknowledgement of the significance of the agenda with a critical approach. The position for critique is not to be found outside the agenda itself but is developed from within. In contrast, the action competence approach demonstrates little interest in United Nations' initiatives when warranting its educational account, and Schlottman actually rejects education for sustainable development entirely due to lack of clarity and what he identifies as first-order aims.[58] The pluralist approach as developed by the Swedish researchers more often refers to the education for sustainable development agenda but rarely as a subject for critical scrutiny on its own terms. There are many good reasons to maintain a distance from the sustainable development agenda, which is indeed contentious and widely discussed, as pointed out previously in this chapter.[59] However, this is still the main focus of the international response to ecological crisis and climate change, deserving attention and critical scrutiny.

3.3 Reimagining Pluralism in Environmental and Sustainability Education

Despite the problems and objections detailed above, a central claim in this chapter is that there are good reasons to defend the expression of a plurality of voices in environmental and sustainability education. I sympathize with the open-endedness of education, which involves not settling the outcome at the outset, a hallmark of the *Bildung* tradition.[60] Moreover, respect for the integrity of the student should be maintained.

However, the starting point of educational practices with regard to sustainability should not be impartiality, but the current world, experiencing urgent crises. This is where environmental and sustainability education is historically situated. Normativity is expressed in the claim that vital elements are at risk—present and future life on Earth, including the more-than-human world. Although the end point is open, utopian imaginaries might be considered, developed, and criticized, pointing toward societies that maintain advantageous living conditions for present and future life on Earth.[61]

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56 Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Kvamme, "Recontextualizing Environmental Ethical Values"; Kvamme "Ethical Grounding of Critical Place-based Education in the Anthropocene," in Paulsen, Jagodzinski, and Hawke, *Pedagogy in the Anthropocene*, 277–94, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90980-2_14.

57 Ole Andreas Kvamme, "School Strikes, Environmental Ethical Values, and Democracy," *Studier i Pædagogisk Filosofi* 8.1 (2019): 6–27, https://doi.org/10.7146/spf.v8i1.117967.

58 Schlottman, *Conceptual Challenges for Environmental Education*, 104–22.

59 See also John Foster, *Post-sustainability: Tragedy and Transformation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

60 Klafki, "Characteristics of Critical-Constructive Didaktik."

61 Utopia is here conceived as "the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being," allowing utopia to be "fragmentary, fleeting, elusive." See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

In this framing (if not earlier), the pluralism, conflicts of interest, and numerous disagreements—essentially, the political dimension—enter the stage, when sustainability values are to be specified, priorities are to be selected from various concerns, and general claims are to be expressed in actions. In this situation, educational practices should not adopt just one position or a single interest involved, but help students to consider various positions and concerns. Such an accommodation may in itself be seen as a dimension of impartiality.[62]

Here is just one key example from a Norwegian context of the conflicts of interest that emerge in the current situation. In 2021 the Supreme Court of Norway ruled licenses for wind power development on Fosen were invalid because the construction violated Sami reindeer herders´ rights.[63] The case involved various conflicting concerns, among them the rights of indigenous people to enjoy their own culture, the protection of nature from anthropogenic activities, and the maintenance of the high energy consumption in Norwegian society demanding massive measures to be taken in the transition to nonfossil energy sources. After more than two years of governmental dilatoriness challenged by political activism including civil disobedience, the Norwegian Ministry of Energy in December 2023 and March 2024 published agreements made between the wind power company and the Sami reindeer herders. The agreements are said to "ensure continued reindeer herding, mitigate operational disadvantages, and provide a basis for future cultural practices."[64]

4. Concluding Remarks: Reconsidering Democracy

In this chapter, I have suggested that in our time of history, it is necessary to make the preservation of advantageous living conditions for present and future life on Earth internal to the educational mandate of schools. As I have shown, this perspective aligns well with the increased attention and reference in global education policy to the common good. Here, the sustainability initiatives taken by the United Nations are particularly relevant, wherein educational institutions are expected to facilitate the obligation of the world community to care for common interests. The updated versions of the Swedish pluralistic approach actually explicitly refer to this agenda in

62 See Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 116–17.

63 Supreme Court of Norway, *Licences for Wind Power Development on Fosen Ruled Invalid as the Construction Violates Sami Reindeer Herders´ Right to Enjoy Their Own Culture,* Supreme Court judgment 11 October 2021, HR-2021–1975-S, https://www.domstol.no/en/supremecourt/rulings/2021/supreme-court-civil-cases/hr-2021-1975-s/.

64 Ministry of Energy, *Agreement between Sør-Fosen Sijte and Fosen Vind*, 19 December 2023, https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/agreement-between-sor-fosen-sitje-and-fosen-vind/id3019277/. While this agreement was made between the wind power company and the herders in the southern part of Fosen, a similar agreement was reached in March 2024 between the wind power company and the Sami reindeer herders in the northern part of Fosen. Ministry of Energy, *Agreement between Nord-Fosen Sijte and Fosen Vind,* 6 March 2024, https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/agreement-between-nord-fosen-siida-and-roan-vind/id3028614/.

formulations of "sustainability commitment" and "the transformations of the world" as the goals of environmental and sustainability education;[65] however, they do not attempt to justify what, in contrast to previous accounts, may be seen as a normative reorientation. In a recent reflection on this matter, scientific evidence is introduced as a possible grounding for environmental and sustainability education without clarifying the normative bearings of such a position.[66]

A conspicuous aspect of all three accounts explored in this chapter is the reference to democracy in an educational context summed up in the emphasis laid on critical thinking, with reservations against inculcating certain values in the students. In a further exploration of the relationship between impartiality and normativity in environmental and sustainability education, considerations on the notion of democracy might be useful.

Such considerations could include "the fundamental coordinates of democracy"—space, time, community, and agency—particularly addressed within critical environmental political theory, expressed in critique of liberal democracy for not being able to come to terms with the grand challenges in the present.[67] This perspective puts pressure on extending the scope of all the four variables. Just a couple of examples linked to agency and community will suffice here as concluding remarks.

Pertinent to the functions of school and education with regard to agency, is how political ecologists for decades have questioned the liberal idea of state neutrality, pointing at how it maintains "a liberal social matrix that recognizes, protects, and rewards the rational, autonomous self in ways that make it 'normal.'"[68] In a North European context this critique of "an incoherent and undesirable ontology—that of social and biological detachment" also encourages reconsiderations of the key concept of *Bildung*.[69] With regard to community, the political theorist William Lafferty has pointed at the impasse of "dysfunctional democracy."[70] Liberal democracies still

65 First quotation from Johan Öhman and Louise Sund, "A Didactic Model of Sustainability Commitment," *Sustainability* 13 (2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063083. Second quotation from Öhman and Leif Östman, "Different Teaching Traditions in Environmental and Sustainability Education," in *Sustainable Development Teaching: Ethical and Political Challenges*, ed. Katrien Van Poeck, Leif Östman, and Johan Öhman (London: Routledge, 2019), 70–82, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351124348-6.

66 "A pluralistic ESE could in that way embrace the scientific consensus over descriptive issues, while open for political conflicts over normative issues" (Tryggvason, Öhman, and Van Poeck, "Pluralistic Environmental and Sustainability Education," 18–19). The distinction descriptive/normative should be discussed, considering the ethical-political dimension of climate science; cf. also Putnam's more general problematization of the dichotomy between fact and value. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 127–49.

67 Quotation from Robyn Eckersley, "Ecological Democracy and the Rise and Decline of Liberal Democracy: Looking Back, Looking Forward," *Environmental Politics* 29 (2020): 214, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1594536.

68 Eckersley, *Green State*, 105.

69 Eckersley, *Green State*, 104. Kvamme, "Rethinking *Bildung* in the Anthropocene."

70 Lafferty, "Governance for Sustainable Development: The Impasse of Dysfunctional Democracy," in *Governance, Democracy and Sustainable Development: Moving beyond the Impasse*, ed. James Meadowcroft, Oluf Langhelle, and Audun Ruud (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2009), 297–337, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849807579.00022.

function as communities determined by national borders establishing competitive entities. Sustainability, in turn, demands a notion of community based on ecological interdependence with an expanded notion of citizenship that incorporates the interests of future generations, the world´s poor and even other species, expressed in the UN conventions referred to earlier in this chapter.

More broadly, a focus on democracy opens up a landscape distinguished by Robert Dahl's often quoted observation, that there is no single theory of democracies—only theories.[71] In this chapter, the retrieval of the notion of the common good is one example of how elements that may be traced back to a civic republican tradition or even communitarianism are reconfigured in global education policy in ways that challenge traditional liberal democracy. Democracy should definitely be maintained as a central reference, but the conception of democracy should continuously be reconsidered in further exploration of the tensions between impartiality and normativity in environmental and sustainability education.

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71 Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 1.

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