

Much More than Knowledge: Virtue Ethics and Character Education for Degrowth

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Introduction

We have a problem with our economic system built around the illusion of infinite material growth. Many indicators have already crossed red lines consequently, including examples such as climate change, loss of biodiversity or human alteration of the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles. They are telling us how dangerously we are living. The studies of the Stockholm Resilience Centre on the planetary boundaries provide evidence of the risks and uncertainties for the stability of the Earth system (Steffen et al., 2015). This situation calls for systemic changes that allow the downscaling of economic system and society's throughput (Kallis, 2011) to maintain our societies within planetary boundaries.

However, this is an elusive problem. The complex, uncertain, and risky nature of the sustainability problems does not allow us to discern which pathways we should follow to transform our structures and lifestyles. Hence, we are confronted with the type of situations that social planners call "wicked" problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). They are "wicked" because there is not one single solution for these problems, and solutions cannot be found within linear and fragmented thinking. On the contrary, systemic relationships are central. The very definition of the problem is closely related to the possible solutions that we are capable of imagining. Moreover, the conditions (and the conceivable solutions) surrounding the problem, change over time and, to add more complexity, they vary with the diversity of agents and perspectives involved (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

Taking the case of climate change as an illustration, the concept itself is controversial; not to mention the fields and approaches that can be considered to articulate solutions: Products markets and consumer culture? Business solutions? Public policies and regulatory frameworks? Technical innovations? Urban planning? Labour markets? Institutional inertia? Our assumptions about growth? Our conception of time? Our feeling of connectedness with nature?

The wide diversity of questions that can emerge from different ideologies, frameworks, and levels reveals that we are all embedded in interdependent networks, path

dependencies, and lock-ins that contribute to the stability of unsustainable socio-technical regimes (Geels, 2005). This is the case for food, transport or energy supply systems, which remain resistant to substantial transformations in spite of the evidences of their social and environmental impacts. Nevertheless, regimes are also well-established social structures because they are constantly reproduced by shaping actors' perceptions of the problems and guiding their agency accordingly. The dominant assumptions about growth at the core of our economic system are a perfect illustration.

When focusing on perceptions (including beliefs, assumptions or emotions) we need to turn our attention to the educational arena, and the role of education in enabling students with the abilities to be aware of their own (and dominant) assumptions and worldviews; to evaluate them from critical, systemic, and futures thinking (Wiek et al. 2011); and, eventually, to shifting them. We argue that such type of work on the students' awareness and subjectivity is a necessary condition to debunk the myth of growth, as a necessary condition for living within planetary boundaries, and within the logics of social justice and human (and non-human) well-being.

Paradigms of education and the “wicked” problems of sustainability

The role of education to enable people to live together in a sustainable way is widely recognized, since the Agenda 21 (UNSD, 1992) referred to education as “critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making” (chapter 36.3). The establishment of the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) (UNECE, 2012) clearly illustrate this central role of education.

However, education often contributes to unsustainable living through a lack of opportunity for learners to critically examine the structures and systems of beliefs that allow and promote unsustainable livings (UNECE, 2012). Quite the opposite, formal education is not separated from those structures and beliefs systems. Such is the case of our economic structures, based on assumptions such as infinite growth, profit as the purpose for business, or the centrality of the market and private property in our social life, which can be argued that are in contradiction with the stability of the Earth system (Kothari et al. 2014). According to this critical view, higher education institutions are seen as contributing to the sustainability crisis (Tilbury, 2011), but also as key actors in the transformative process towards sustainable societies, through their functions of education, research, and outreach (Fadeeva and Mochizuki, 2010; Wals, 2013).

Therefore, a central question remains about the type of education that dominates our schools and universities: Is it appropriate to enable students with the skills needed to deal with the “wickedness” of our growth-related crises? On this respect, Orr (1990) claims that more education of the same type will only make (eco-social) problems worse: a type of education that “emphasizes theories, not values; abstraction rather than consciousness; neat answers instead of questions; and technical efficiency over conscience” (p. 238). After all, as Assadourian (2017) reminds us, “[b]ecause learning is

a natural part of being alive –and increases the odds of staying alive– at its very root, the role of education may be to facilitate survival, both for the individual that is learning and for the social group (and species) of which it is a part” (p. 3).

Yet, we have already transgressed core planetary boundaries, entailing high risks and uncertainties about the safe operating space in which humanity can live (Steffen et al. 2015). The currently dominant paradigm of education –transmissive and largely designed to serve the market needs– is at odds with the "wickedness" problems of this new era of the Anthropocene built on acceleration and growth. This is a term used to label the current geological epoch, in which human activities have grown to become significant geological forces (Crutzen, 2006). An epoch full of challenges for survival.

Consequently, a more emancipatory perspective of education is required, aimed at helping learners to become critically aware of how they perceive the world, with a view to fostering citizen engagement with socio-environmental issues (Jickling and Walls, 2008; Walls and Jickling, 2002). Implementing this approach requires that students learn about their own learning, reflect upon their values, question socially dominant beliefs, and develop a philosophy of life that has meaning, to them and to their relationship with others (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). In short, it requires that students learn to navigate complexity and uncertainty, and to participate in social transformations for the common good.

Virtues (strengths of character) in transformative education for degrowth

Socially transformative approaches to education involve training learners to develop their moral skills. Current conversations on education regarding sustainability problems may include the development of normative competences among the goals of education (see Wiek et al, 2011 as an illustration). However, these conversations tend to privilege information-processing and problem-solving competences at the expense of moral skills (Adomßent et al., 2014; Hesselbarth and Schaltegger, 2014; Rieckmann, 2012).

Against this context, we argue that virtue ethics is an appropriate conceptual framework to operationalize the development of moral skills within a socially transformative paradigm of education. Cultivating virtue in formal education (i.e. character education) is controversial (Kristjánsson, 2013), particularly in higher education, so much knowledge-driven. Nevertheless, virtues -or strengths of character, the equivalent term in the field of positive psychology- are moral dispositions that guide our thinking, feeling, and action (Murphy, 1999). Virtues/strengths focus on the development of our moral character rather than the obedience of a prescriptive principle or rule, which helps to promote a broadly shared moral framework (Crossan et al., 2013). At the same time, the focus on virtues enable learners to understand themselves better, to challenge their own assumptions, and to acquire new perspectives. In addition, since virtues/strengths are defined as traits that are learned and developed through practice, they are teachable, and their development can be measured (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

Furthermore, as virtues/strengths are moral dispositions that orient our judgement and behaviour towards the good (Mintz, 1996), they may help to understand (and feel) sustainability and post-growth societies as an attitude or a way of life, rather than as a

list of predefined practices to be performed. Thus, the virtues/strengths framework serves to ground the emancipatory process of education better than other approaches focused on providing definite rules of behaviour. For example, educating the strength of gratitude (part of the virtue of transcendence) or the strength of prudence (part of the virtue of temperance) involves not only learning to carry out specific actions that show gratitude or prudence. As they are dispositions, they also concern awareness, thoughts, emotions, and reactions associated with these strengths. In other words, the development of gratitude or prudence includes perceiving the necessity of these strengths; experiencing them permanently; and driving one's life from feelings of gratitude or prudence.

Conclusion

Virtue ethics and strengths of character provide an appropriate framework to help students to better understand themselves, to challenge their own assumptions, and to acquire new perspectives. This work serves to ground and to practice emancipatory and transformative views of the education for common good, that is required to deal with the wicked problem of sustainability, to demystify growth as a key foundation of that problem, and, ultimately, to fulfil the goal of individual and collective survival.

However, placing virtues/strengths at the core of formal education is challenging, especially for higher education institutions. It implies revising and rethinking the role of universities to go beyond their focus on the *minds* and *hands* of students; they should work on their *hearts* also (Sipos, Battisti, and Grimm, 2008). On the other hand, it poses a deep challenge for universities to navigate between two conflicting logics. One logic (i.e. instrumental logic) is concerned with training students so that they are able to reproduce structures. Such reproduction favour employability of students (and survival of higher education institutions operating in an increasingly and market-oriented competitive environment), even if it implies transgressing planetary boundaries or going against principles of social justice. The other logic (i.e. emancipatory logic) is that of universities aimed to equip learners with the capacity to critically examine dominant frames of reference. This challenging of structures favour the survival of humanity, the common good, and human flourishing. We argue that character education and virtues ethics serve to ground this second logic.

Hence, more research is needed in order to bring more light into pathways to deal with that duality and to institutionalize a type of education that is deeply connected with the big question: *For what (and for whom) education?*

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