The Possibility of Global Governance

Cosmopolitanism beyond Comfort Zones

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'The Possibility of Global Governance'
is a research project about **the global ethics of sustainable development governance**.

It does however not initally focus on the ethical *implications* of the global societal problems we face. Rather, the emphasis is on the ethics related to the way we make sense of these problems in interactive knowledge generation and decision making.
From this perspective, the vantage point of the research is that the **quality of governance essentially depends on the quality of the working of 'the knowledge-policy interface'**, and that this 'quality' concerns a specific **morality** with regard to the generation and metamosphosis of knowledge prior to and in decision making itself.

- part one -
Deliberate Visions
on a Sustainable World
[what can we know?]

1. Transparency and its discomforts
(building on meaningful convergences of interest)

2. The ethical defy of public reflexivity
(building on meaningful divergences of opinion)

3. Prosperity without truth

(building on meaningful atmospheres of trust)

- part two -
A new critical humanism
(what can we account,
prove, guarantee?)

4. Enlightenment today

5. A language of the global polis for sustainable development governance

6. The ethics and aesthetics of moral anthropocentrism

- part three -
A solidary cosmopolitanism
beyond comfort zones
[what can we do?]

7. Sharing knowledge capacity building
(enabling the transveral human)

8. Sharing deliberative space

(enabling the reflexive discourse society)

9. Sharing freedoms of collective choice
(enabling open-ended global governance)

Deliberate visions on a sustainable world

Fair and effective global governance starts with a critical and fair approach to making sense of the world, ourselves and the issues at stake

1 Transparency and its discomforts
a. The need to go beyond rational systems-thinking for fair and effective global governance

We don't need a joint understanding of 'the earth-society system' to engage in fair and effective global governance.

There is some logic in the claim that, in the interest of fair and effective sustainable development measures, it is important to first try to understand and assess 'the system' of the interlinked social practices and their relations with the natural and technological environment. The problem however is that this system is not a neutral given 'out there'. Its own complexity and the existence of uncertainties, ambiguities and unknowns that trouble the assessment of these social practices, of the state of our natural and technical environment and of their impact upon us, result in different interpretations of that system.

This means that we cannot come to a joint understanding of the earth-society system, which has implications for *how we can* converge on how to change it.

This has three important consequences that have not only philosophical but also practical policy-related implications:

(1) It is impossible to come to a joint holistic view on the earth-society system in the interest of sustainable development governance. Not only are our actions said to be of contingent nature, also the perception of their effects can lead to different conclusions. If a practice causes a specific 'effect' according to the one, it may cause no effect, a different or even the opposite effect according to another. In other words: what are synergies for the one may be conflicts for the other, which makes it impossible to 'envision' in consensus a holist earth-society system for the totality of practices and their effects, 'bigger' than the sum of its parts, that would ensure sustainable development;

(2) The precautionary principle is an ultimately relevant *moral* policy principle, but its necessity and workability cannot be motivated on the basis of systems analysis;

(3) It is impossible to converge on a compatible top-down / bottom up approach for fair and effective global governance: the way we try to use 'soft' normative references (such as 'sustainable development') to unanimously *extract* practical policies for complex 'unstructured' problems may lead to as diverging views as the way we try to use 'hard' knowledge-based references to unambiguously *instruct* these policies. The faltering climate change negotiation process may currently be the best example of this.

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1 Transparency and its discomforts
b. A '3-level view' on sustainable development as a workable alternative for the '3 pillar approach'

We don't need a joint understanding of 'the earth-society system' to engage in fair and effective global governance.

Rather, a first challenge is in creating incentives for meaningful convergences of interest

viewing sustainable development as a *convergence of interests* on three progressive 'policy levels'

The motivation for this view is that, whatever our stake or concern is as individual citizens, communities, companies or institutions, we all have a joint interest in making these distinct levels 'work'.

normative integration

a 'meta-level' that starts from an interpretation of the concept of sustainable development as a meta-norm under which every human socio-economic activity would need to 'fit' and that is inspired by the fundamental values of human equality and by the ethics of solidary inclusion of 'the powerless' (the uneducated, the poor, the next generations, the past generations);

pragmatic assemblage

a 'medium level' that concentrates on the 'building blocks' of sustainable development and their interrelation. The common sense character is related to criteria for the interplay of processes: effectiveness, additionality, incentives, no leakage or spill-over, no adverse effects in other contexts…;

pragmatic assimilation

a 'ground level' that focuses on how and why specific actors formulate own responsibilities and (eventually) take corresponding action, based on a 'common sense' approach with regard to correct behaviour in the 'spirit' of sustainable development (e.g. *efficient* use of resources, *less* waste, *clean* technology, … but also *fair* trade and *decent* labour conditions or *transparent* policies and *democratic* decision making…).

While the three-level view may look artificial, the claim is that the real challenge for sustainable development governance is to 'succesfully' connect the levels. The reason is that 'making the levels work' means different things in the three cases, and the difference is in the meaning of 'collective responsibility'. 'Connecting them' leads to specific requirements for the way we make sense about our behaviour and rationalise it in view of the totality. Today, our socio-political society is not organised in the way described above. The traditional political claim is that 'we know what (science tells us) to do', and that governance comes down to 'pragmatically assemble' our pragmatic assimilations (our 'good intentions') into a coherent totality. Everybody knows that this is an uttermost complex exercise, but the general assumption today is that it is a feasible fix in principle, 'if everybody shows political will'.

A principal claim put forward by this research project is that this approach is wrong. Fair and effective sustainable development governance is *not* only a matter of assembling and organising all good intentions 'inspired' by the same metanorm, as this still provides ways for actors to escape specific responsibilities that are crucial for sustainable development. This problem manifests as (1) a discourse related accountability problem, (2) a system related accountability problem and (3) a solidarity related accountability problem.
These three reasons motivate an alternative picture of global governance that would also make explicit these 'additional' responsibilities. That alternative leans on the understanding that pragmatic assemblage as sketched above is *not* instrumental (in the sense that it does not concern the rational solution of a complex puzzle), but that it is normative in its own sense. In terms of the three-level view, pragmatic assemblage should be 'forced in between' the metalevel of normative integration and the ground level of pragmatic assimilation.

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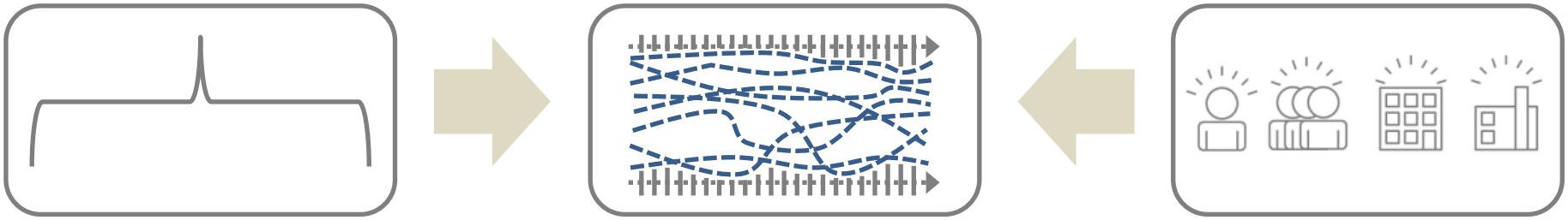
1 Transparency and its discomforts
c. Towards a politics of integration and confrontation for sustainable development governance

the traditional political view

metanorms — *inspire us* — *to take common sense responsible actions* — *that all need to be* — *organised into a fair and effective totality*

normative integration → pragmatic assimilation → pragmatic assemblage

the advanced normative view



metanorms — *inspire and confront us with* — *the need to organise a fair and effective totality* — *that integrates and confronts* — *common sense responsible actions*

normative integration → pragmatic assemblage ← pragmatic assimilation

In a politics of integration and confrontation, 'connecting the levels' lead to specific requirements for the way we make sense about our own behaviour and that of others, and rationalise it in view of the totality. What is essential is that this 'politics' would need to care for as well an 'enforcing' as an 'enabling' of that confrontation. The 'enabling' dimension would be ensured through the implementation of an advanced conception of 'distributive justice' (caring for a 'sharing of knowledge capacity', a 'sharing of deliberative space', and a 'sharing of freedoms of collective choice'.

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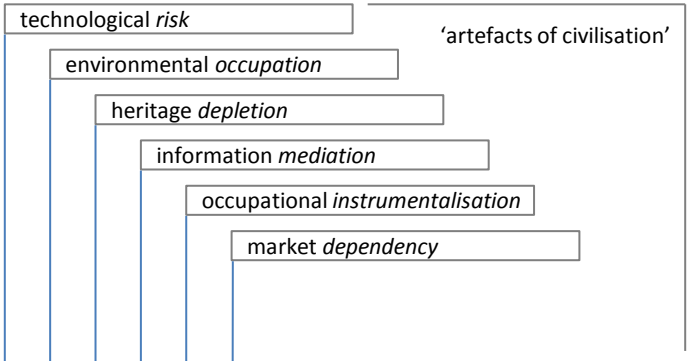
2 The ethical defy of public reflexivity

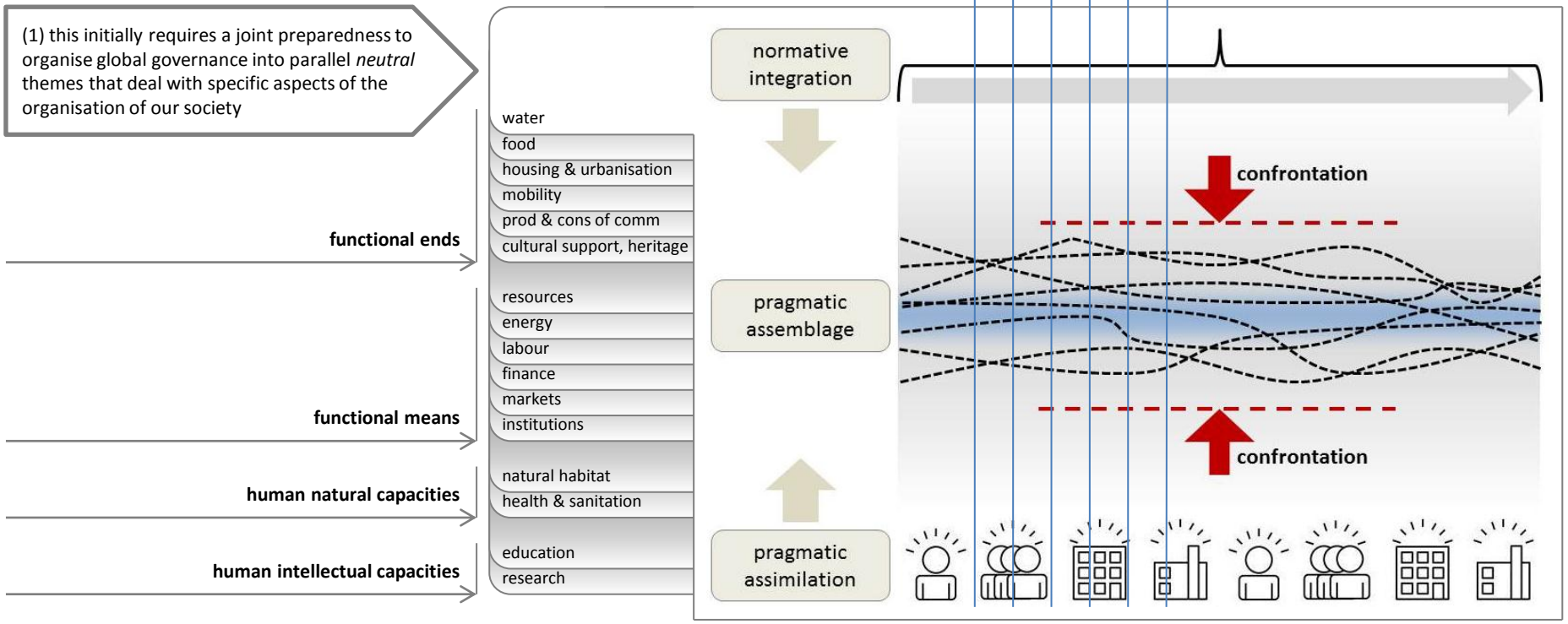
We don't need to choose between socialism or liberalism, or to decide whether markets should be free or regulated.

Rather, a second challenge is in creating incentives for meaningful divergences of opinion

(2) So (1) provides the possibility to deal with specific *artefacts of civilisation* that, in the way they work as cross-cutting mediating factors 'in between' the three levels, prevent to rationally 'connect' these levels.



(1) this initially requires a joint preparedness to organise global governance into parallel *neutral* themes that deal with specific aspects of the organisation of our society



Today, whether we want it or not, striving for social well-being *implies* these 'artefacts of civilisation'. Not only is there the existence of specific unknowables,they are also (each of them in their specific way) marked by moral pluralism, in the sense that, even if we all would agree on the related knowledge base, opinions would still differ on the *acceptability* of specific practices of technological risk, environmental occupation, heritage depletion, information mediation, occupational instrumentalisation and market dependency,. However, focussing deliberation around these neutral artefacts of civilisation *within the context of a specific neutral theme* provides incentives to 'map' meaningful divergences of opinion and the possibility to 'unveil' intentions of and responsibilities for distinct actors on all three SD policy levels.

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3 Prosperity without truth

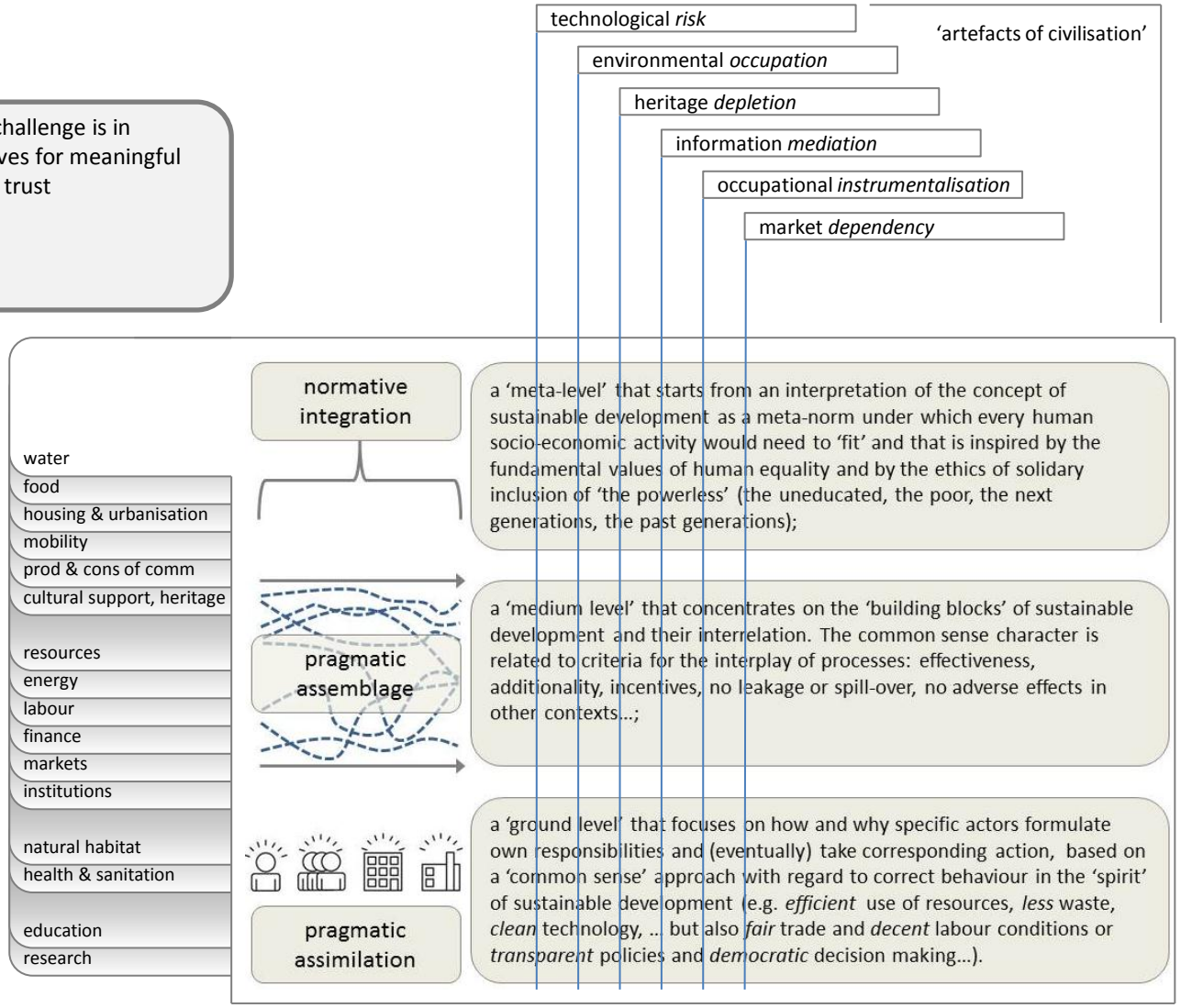
We don't need to protect traditional social, political and cultural identities for prosperity.

Rather, a third challenge is in creating incentives for meaningful atmospheres of trust

Today several old and new boundary conditions, said to be needed for the system 'to work', are contested. They are understood as 'norms', and work as well as a 'limiting factor' to our collective behaviour or as a privilege in that behaviour:

(1) state sovereignty, military defence and economic growth
(2) cultural or geographically bound integrity, identity and descent

Globalisation or not, given that, in principle, global prosperity does not *necessarily* depend on these criteria, it is impossible to rationalise their relevance as benchmarks for that kind of policy making that would want to comply with normative references such as sustainable development or social equality. As a result, **these 'criteria' have nothing relevant to say about our responsibilities in the thematic three level matrix.**



Considerations on what would be the meaning and implications of a fair and critical approach to making sense of the world, ourselves and the issues at stake lead to the insight that the settings for the generation and metamorphosis of knowledge in deliberation and decision making contexts need to meet specific requirements so as to enable them to generate 'critical societal trust' with regard to the way we deal with these issues at stake.

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quotes from the research

The problem with the concept of the green economy is that it gives the impression that sustainable development is simply about adding up our good intentions. It is not.

Today, the right to be educated and to develop a critical sense in order to become a more vocal citizen and to stand stronger in society implies 'by definition' a learning environment and method with a universal character. In other words: there can be no cultural-specific approaches to individual and collective knowledge capacity building. This should not lead to a flat world or a new kind of intolerance. Tolerance is by definition tolerance of the uncertain in its various alienating emergences Ethical and aesthetical diversity origins from contingent dynamics driven by 'capable' interacting human beings, not from artificially demarcated multiculturalisms.

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A global ethics for sustainable development governance does not proclaim a traditional naturalist approach that would defend 'the scientific method' as the only possible way to make sense of reality. Neither does it advocate a 'contextualist sterilisation' of the rational scientific method. The aim is to open up possibilities for politics to rely *solely* on inclusive, reflexive and transparent dialogue that takes up credible science in value-based deliberation..

There are no comfort zones for science, politics or civil society anymore

The global ethics for sustainable development governance imply that there is no place for detached poetry in the science and politics of sustainable development governance. When the stakes are high, also metaphors need to be negotiated.

… inspire the need for a new critical humanism …

4 Enlightenment Today

Overcoming the comfort of polarisation

Public and political discourse in which actors take position in connection to the socio-economic and ecological challenges is mediated; not only by practical limitations, but also by settings that enable strategic interest framing. Strategic interest framing affects the way we make sense of issues, and so it also affects the language in which we express our interests, concerns, ideas and critiques. That language is however often populist and therefore polarising, especially when this positioning needs to be done in the 'context of urgency' that around most of the global issues. The result is that, in light (or darkness) of the many complexities, uncertainties, ambiguities, unknowns and unknowables that mark the issues at stake, one can observe that discourse on solutions typically remains stuck in discussions over 'conflicting truths', while debates on responsibilities over and again revert to taking positions between 'conflicting identities'. In scientific and political argumentation (from science, policy and civil society), one can observe that strategic framings and simplifications of complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity may lead to polarisations that tend to serve a maintenance of the own comfort zone rather than a conciliation in the interest of reaching consensus.

The new enlightenment concerns attitudes of **public transparency**, **public reflexivity** and **the preparedness to accommodate with all actors concerned**. This implies

an ethics of the critical-analytical

→ public transparency = 'showing that your acts are consistent with your words';

→ public reflexivity = as scientists, engineers, managers, politicians, activists, citizens, communicators, beyond facts, concerns and interests, to reason in public

about what you believe but cannot prove;
what you fear but cannot account;
what you hope but cannot guarantee.

an ethics beyond the critical-analytical

a preparedness for accomodation needs

→ a sense for solidarity with and social justice towards the 'powerless', including those who do not longer exist, including those who don't exist yet;

→ a sense for accountability towards victims of collateral harm and towards future generations (by providing them with a resigned explanation of why we thought this was the best thing we could do).

In other words, a new enlightenment essentially concerns a critical awareness of what we can and cannot know and should and should not know in political decision making, and of how knowledge in general gets shaped and mediated by actors' motivations and interests in science, advocacy and politics.

5 A moral language of the global polis for sustainable development governance

the traditional political view

Our current political settings do not inspire reflexivity nor deliberation. Our current academic settings do not inspire reflexivity nor transdisciplinarity.

the advanced normative view

An alternative language for sustainable development governance is a 'language of the global polis' that is needed for two reasons. At first, it aims to reveal, deconstruct and transcend strategic framings and resulting polarisations described above. In a second perspective, its construction and deliberation is the basis of sustainable development governance itself. Nobody can speak that language 'alone', as nobody has, by himself, the knowledge to speak it. In other words: no individual, interest group or authority possesses alone the knowledge to effectively and fairly deal with sustainable development, neither the insight of what this knowledge should comprise or how it should be generated, negotiated or used. And no individual, interest group or authority possesses alone the knowledge to assess practical outcomes of previous policy choices or the insight into how and why our world evolved to where it is now. Therefore, the language of moral reasoning for sustainable development can only be 'spoken' in reflective interaction; doing by learning, learning by doing, over and over again.

6 The ethics and aesthetics of moral anthropocentrism

We don't need to try to think from out of an ecocentric perspective.

Given our capacities for reflection and conceptual thinking, the human being can be considered as an unnatural creature. We need to accept that we can only think anthropocentric. We don’t possess nature, but, on the other hand, it is also meaningless to speak of the ‘rights’ of nature.
The morality connected to this position is in the application of the new envisioned enlightenment and the new language to our relation with nature.

… to foster a new distributive justice for sustainable development governance

Sustainable development is human rights-based societal development

7 Sharing Knowledge Capacity Building

Enabling the transveral human

In terms of fostering people's capacities to contribute to and enjoy well-being, the ultimate concern is *not* water, food, sanitation and job creation, but education and *critical-intellectual* personal development. A global ethics would in essence imply the possibility of an 'intellectual-discursive' globalisation and give a new meaning to cosmopolitanism and the conception of the global citizen. Its foundation would be the human right to enjoy an individual intellectual development that stimulates curiosity and critical-contextual thinking and that would strengthen and motivate the individual to follow transversal trajectories between self-maintaining cultural, social and political territories, and to enter or create joint interactive and solidary reflection spaces.

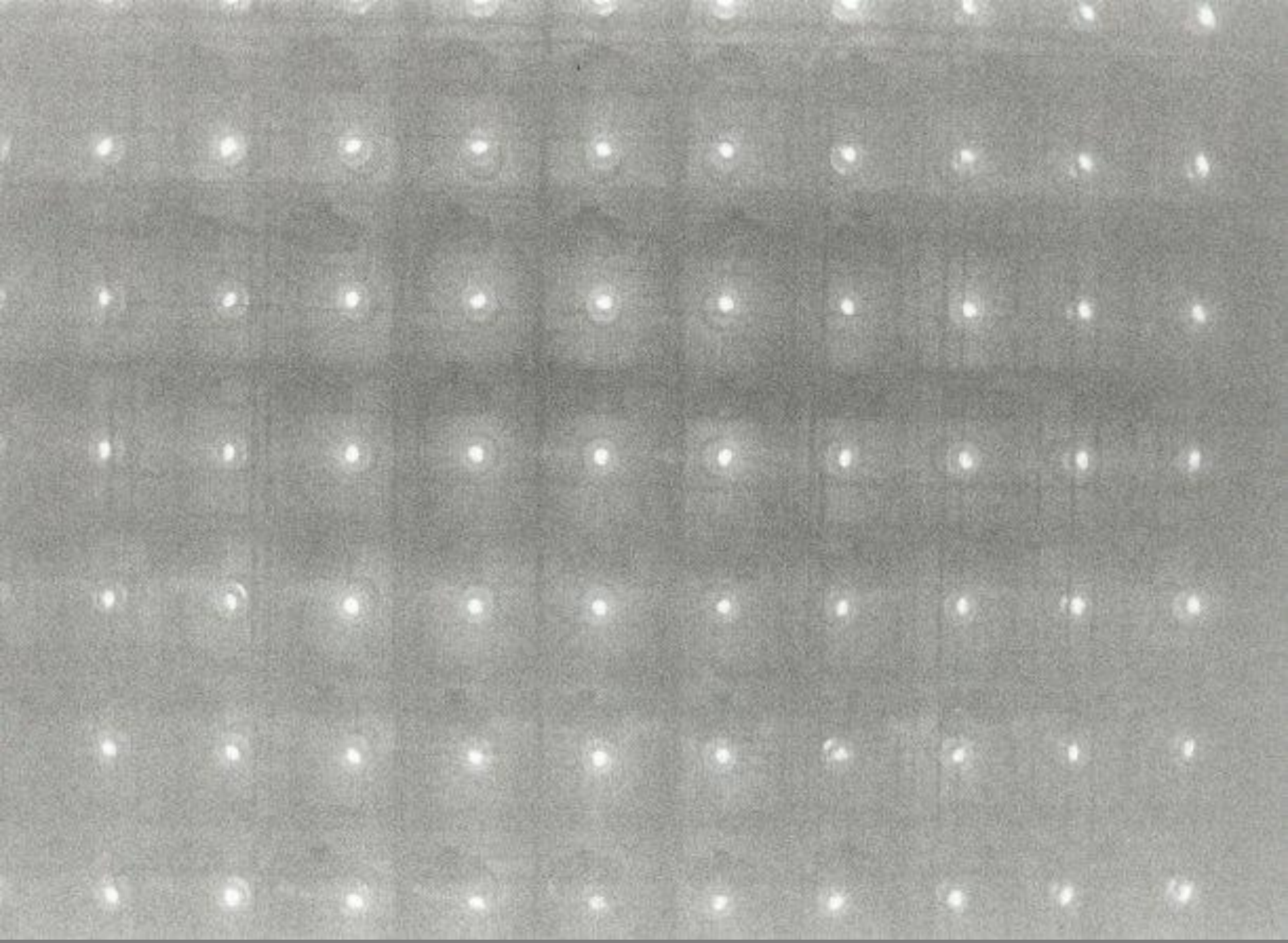
8 Sharing Deliberative Space

Enabling the reflexive discourse society

Citizens are more sensitive to *injustice* than to the (potential) burden of the aforementioned artefacts of civilisation (technological risk, environmental occupation, heritage depletion, information mediation, occupational instrumentalisation and market dependency). Therefore, the principle inclusion of the potentially affected should be the moral vantage point of advanced democratic decision making. The constitutional basis of a 'reflexive discourse society' should be a democracy in which elected politicians *moderate inclusions* rather than 'represent' visions. On that basis, the reflexive discourse society would foster a culture of deliberative knowledge generation and decision making that would generate societal trust 'by method instead of proof'.

9 Sharing Collective Freedoms of Choice

Enabling open-ended global governance

Sustainable development cares for a 'double social equality principle'. On the individual level, the principle implies an *intragenerational* social equality in the interest of ensuring the right and possibility of personal intellectual development and interaction as described above. An *intergenerational* social equality would enable the right and possibility for the global society to continuously rethink its moral stance with regard to the situation in view of the future, and this based on spontaneous reassessments of this situation, inspired by the past or on the occasion of unforeseen events with a global impact.

The vantage point and final aim of sustainable development is thus not to strive for a liberal but fair and green economy, but to maintain a liberal but solidary and critical intellectual discourse. An institutional framework for sustainable development can only work when it is inspired on and supported by a deliberate culture for sustainable development. This culture is a culture of global societal responsibility; a responsibility to provide equal human rights related to learning and participating.