
Editorial

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1 Introduction: In search of morality

This special issue has its origin in three Swedish business scholars writing a book on economy and morality (Bonnedahl et al., 2007). The book is in Swedish, so we understand that most of you will not read it, but it has provided fuel to a process that so far has led to the organising of a track on the theme of this issue at *The International Sustainable Development Research Conference* in Västerås, Sweden (2007), to a promise to run the track again at the 2008 conference, and, thanks to the Editor-in-Chief of IJISD,

Delyse Springett, to this issue. To our delight, the issue gathers a highly interesting and diverse group of scholars around the theme of moral responsibility in relation to sustainable development. This editorial, however, will not be typical in the sense of trying to introduce and synthesise the different contributions. Instead, we will focus on setting forth arguments as to why we need to bring a moral dimension into research on sustainable development. In doing so, we will draw upon the different contributions to support our case.

To set things off, here is the quotation that we used in the call for papers to attract participants to the above-mentioned conference track:

“Sustainable development remains the overarching goal that frames all our economic, social and environmental action. Let me say this. It is as if I have three children – the economy, our social agenda, and the environment. Like any modern father – if one of my children is sick, I am ready to drop everything and focus on him until he is back to health. That is normal and responsible.”

The quotation is from José Manuel Barroso, the chairman of the European Commission,¹ and he went on to make the claim that the child who is really sick is the economy. In times of alarming calls to address acute environmental destruction and social injustice (climate change, deforestation, poverty, starvation), ‘the economy’, it seems, is what appeals to his responsiveness, his parental (paternal) instincts. ‘The economy’ is the child in need of his care.

In our view, Barroso’s caring instincts illustrate well the significant role of the economy and the accelerating diffusion of economisation. It reveals the particular faith in the economy as the cause of all ‘benefits’ and, if it is accepted that it has given rise to ‘ills’ as well, the medical solution is more of the same medicine. In short, the economy is the privileged child of our time. However, as becomes evident in this issue, this child, and its premature attempts at attaining sustainable development, is a malfunctioning child. We suggest that the Alpha male among the children – the economy – shows serious signs of autism.² The discourse of sustainable development, as developed during the last decades, has been dominated by caring for the economy. Consequently, the family of sustainable development has allowed itself to be dominated by this child: social choice and performance are predominantly valued through cost–benefit analyses; human well-being and progress are predominately expressed through monetary terms (*x* dollars more as the key indicator for a better life); nature is predominantly ascribed value only when possible to translate into monetary terms and economic use-value; and moral responsibility has only rarely formed part of the discourse.

Barroso’s response is thus typical and tragically ‘normal’. It might be said that this type of response falls into the category “what-we-take-for-granted-and-think-*with*” and not into the category of “what-we-critically-assess-and-think-*of*” (Bauman, 2002). By this, we mean that the current ontology of the economy and the ongoing process of economisation have reached an axiomatic status. So, when Barroso and others label this normality as responsible, we, together with the contributors to this issue, argue that this type of responsiveness and responsibility should be interpreted differently. At its core, it means sending the sustainable development family into therapy, into a search for morality.

2 Why moral responsibility?

More specifically, there are two important reasons for engaging in a discourse on moral responsibility vs. the economy-driven 'sustainable development' that we especially want to emphasise through this special issue. The first is that, as matters of moral responsibility often are regarded as 'sticky' issues in sustainable development, this prevents those admitting to, or beginning to approach it, from penetrating sustainable development thinking and practice. Sustainable development is, in a Foucauldian sense, 'inefficient' and not susceptible to 'discipline': it is difficult to 'manage' (Springett, 2006). Moral duties and dilemmas are overlooked matters in sustainable development, which attract little scholarly attention. You might encounter the word 'morality' in articles, debates and policies, but people usually take flight when the matter at hand (be it climate change or poverty and starvation) comes too close to one's own lifestyle (What? Me? Now? What can I do?) or others' lifestyles (should I actually say to someone, in person, that he or she is actually undertaking immoral thinking or actions?). Reading Albert Bandura's paper (this issue) gives you an idea of how we go about morally disengaging us from such stickiness.

The second reason holds that the way modernity ploughs away towards what Ulrich Beck calls the 'risk society' and Zygmunt Bauman calls 'liquid modernity' makes sustainable development enormously difficult. Over the last decades, traditional institutions have come under immense pressure, predominantly due to the tilted condition of globalisation, which has the principles of economisation as its guiding principles. Economisation, manifested through the ontology of economic organisation (Bonnedahl and Eriksson, this issue) and international trade, the elites of affluent consumers (Hurth and Wells, this issue) and leaders, capital, shareowners, investors and so on, is truly exterritorial. Nation-states and political institutions are still bound to its territorial colonisation (their political reach is at best strong on an inter-state level).

When the challenge of sustainable development is assessed from a critical perspective that does not place faith in the medical prescription of more economisation, then there seems to be a need for a restoration of the balance between economy and politics. We need, as Ulrich Beck argues, to reinvent politics, understood as the collective activity in which measures to visualise and implement fair and just societies (a global community) are carried out, at the same time as a more responsible economic system is developed. Reinventing politics and constructing a responsible economic system indeed imply the inclusion of morality and ethics suitable for our age (Jensen, this issue).

Critical assessments of the current ongoing economic globalisation depict the challenge of sustainable development as a lack of global political solutions to global problems (the market even reinforces these problems), which might imply that the only relevant level on which to seek solutions to sustainable development issues is at the macro-level (constructing universal moral and legal laws and norms, rights and duties). This does not necessarily have to be the case, though. It is from single individuals that morally good conduct takes root, springs and flourishes. Moral responsibility is here considered an individual duty, but needs support from societal structures (Schrader, this issue). Returning to the sick but malfunctioning child – the economy – all the actors central to it – simply put, regulators, consumers and producers – have individual moral responsibility, while at the same time they need support from the surrounding structures – the institutional frameworks of regulation, consumption and production. Although unjust and unfair conduct could be rationally explained by blaming

‘bad structures’, it never can be morally justified. Nature might be unstoppable when striking back hard, but hard social structures, however deterministic they *seem* to be, are contingent and are vulnerable to change!

All the contributing authors in this special issue touch upon economy and morality, on the fact that emphasis needs to be put on both structures and actors, and on the ethical, political and economic challenges that such attempts trigger. Together, all the contributions also point to the need to cast the limelight on different societal levels and underline the fact that there are certain people, communities, states, that need to respond quickly to the challenge that sustainable development presents.

3 Responding to sustainable development

Our response, and view on morality, builds on the assumption that people, as the Swedish social psychologist Johan Asplund argues, are socially responsive. They come alive in the presence of others and are lifeless in isolation. This responsiveness is fundamental and comes before reason and rationality, which means that a social responsiveness that is disciplined and formalised cannot be considered socially responsive (Asplund, 1987, p.16). Asplund states that our responsiveness might even come before morality, but we here see it more as the initial moral impulse, sparked by emotions and feelings (Jensen, this issue).

Linking social responsiveness to ethics (the philosophy of moral conduct), we here relate to approaches such as Nel Noddings’ ethics of care and Emmanuel Levinas’ concern for ‘the other’. For Noddings (1984), her feministic approach is “rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (p.2) and she locates “the very wellspring of ethical behaviour in human affective response” (p.3). We also see the impulse to meet ‘the other’ as an unconditional moral responsibility of each individual (cf. Levinas, 1969). Noddings’ responsiveness and Levinas’ responsibility are, and have been, effectively numbed by the prevailing dearth of ethical theory and moral praxis in the economised response to sustainable development. Changes related to time and space dimensions are making these relationships and responsibilities more fragmented and ‘specialised’.

Economisation is not all bad, but these processes ‘do’ things to our moral behaviour. The more we are guided by the principles of the economy and economisation, the more is our responsiveness made difficult and the more is our responsibility dispersed and fragmented in the global input–throughput–output systems (Bandura, this issue; Bonnedahl and Eriksson, this issue).

‘I bought the t-shirt in the store, but I did not kill the workers who were exposed to harmful working conditions that also harmed the environment close to the t-shirt factory somewhere in South-East Asia’. Somehow, along the global value chain and the meta-structures of economisation, this remains legal and ‘normal’. It is even presented as being beneficial to ‘other’ workers, regions and countries. That is, our consumption and production ‘here’ and ‘now’ are promoting and creating wealth ‘there’ and ‘then’ (a so-called trickle-down effect) – all measured and expressed in monetary terms and utility (Jensen, 2007), not in terms of a morally good life for the benefit of all. Instead, responsibility is confined to a specific part of the value chain and we confine our morality to the immediate transactions before us and to the particular task we perform in this

chain. In the current economic system, our moral responsibility usually stops where the monetary transaction ends.

In short, to dutifully follow the moral impulse of responsibility towards ‘the Other’ – the social responsiveness to ethics – does not fit well with the principles driving economisation and the economised response to sustainable development. As Asplund, Levinas and Noddings point out, social responsiveness cannot be predicted, controlled or monetised, and attempts to bring this ‘stickiness’ into thinking and practice in sustainable development merely seem to alert the tendency to draw lines and borders, and to measure and monetise morality. Attempts to infuse morality into sustainable development are then effectively confined to the discourse and organisation of the market and consequently it falls out of the ‘reality’ with which the regulator, producer or consumer has to deal.

Sustainable development is too often presented as a task, which the following of the principles of economisation will solve. Leave it to the producers and consumers on the market and the most ‘goods’ for everybody will be created. It is assumed that we are on the right path, the path towards the best of all worlds. Bravo and Marelli and Hurt and Wells (both this issue) show how economic progress has a problematic relationship with environmental impact. But, as it goes, if the market fails in some respect along this path, in accounting for or dealing with negative consequences, the third actor in the economy, the legislators, step in and shoulder the task of correcting the mistakes. In general, we trust that the economised response to the call for sustainable development is dealt with by these three actors.

Non-Governmental Organisations might here be a thorn in the side, but they are increasingly pushed to organise as their ‘opponents’ and to account for their activism in how they influence consumption, production and legislation. The language of economisation is spilling over to NGOs (Powell et al., 2005) and it is via market changes that their impact will be measured and rewarded. In this development, we see a gradual increase in our role as ‘actors on the market’ rather than as ‘active citizens in society’. This means that we fall into the trap of continually placing our actions in a context, which effectively defines morality and moral responsibility as non-issues.

In conclusion, there are too many signs that we are not managing to take into account

- the environmentally and socially destructive side-effects of economisation
- the lack of, predominantly global, institutions
- the need for a more emotionally guided moral responsiveness to ‘the other’ (both the immediate and the distanced Other).

Our response is therefore to continuously address matters of moral responsibility in order to challenge the legitimacy of following only the duties, principles or rules outlined in the economised response to sustainable development.

However, even though this striving towards an immediate response to ‘the other’, which obliges us to take moral responsibility (Levinas, 1969) is important, it is not sufficient in our times of global interdependency in which global cause and effects are blurred and our common fate is threatened. Given our increasing capacities to inflict harm upon humans and nature at a ‘distance’, there is a need for, what might be called, an ‘effaced’ moral responsiveness to these new threats that often lies beyond our immediate reach. We here move beyond Asplund, Noddings and Levinas as we consider including future generations, animals and plants in our moral spheres. Jensen (this issue) provides

an example here when, based on Hans Jonas's ethics for the technological age, he argues that 'fear' might drive us towards this extended moral responsiveness. It is a radical thought, but ideas and solutions beyond what might appear as radical green attempts today are badly needed. This issue will hopefully help spark developments in this direction.

Lastly, we will overview the contributions in this issue, commenting briefly on the essence of each contribution.

Albert Bandura draws our attention to the influential role played by selective moral disengagement for social practices that cause widespread human harm and degrade the environment. Disengagement of moral self-sanctions, which enables people to pursue detrimental practices freed from the restraint of self-censure, is achieved by investing harmful practices with worthy purposes through social, national, and economic justifications; enlisting exonerative comparisons that render the practices righteous; use of sanitising and convoluting language that disguises what is being done; reducing accountability by displacement and diffusion of responsibility; ignoring, minimising, and disputing harmful effects; and dehumanising and blaming the victims and derogating the messengers of ecologically bad news. Learning about these mechanisms serves to put the light not only on others but also on ourselves – How do we manage to disengage with issues that have clear moral implications were they to be confronted?

Giangiaco Bravo and Beatrice Marelli take one of the most popular cause-and-effect theories of green economy to face reality – the Environmental Kuznet's Curve. The Kuznets' Curve argues for an inverted-U shaped relationship between economic development and environmental quality. Although this relationship has mainly been examined at the macro-economic level, it ultimately rests on the assumption of a number of changes in the attitudes and behaviours of high-income country citizens. This paper's results show that environmental attitudes and behaviours are only weakly related to national income and cast some doubts on the mythical assumption of 'the richer the greener'. This also raises the issue of the moral responsibility of the rich and famous.

Victoria Hurth and Peter Wells show that the affluent class' relation to sustainable development is not only understudied, but also morally loaded. A basic conclusion of their article is that the affluent class has to take more responsibility, not because they are morally better equipped than those in lower classes, but because they are more destructive per capita, have greater opportunity to opt out of the vicious cycle of unsustainable consumption, and as they frequently function as role models in society.

Ulf Schrader investigates the moral responsibility of consumers and, from citizenship theory, he addresses the extent of and preconditions for consumers' moral responsibility for sustainable consumption. Through John F. Kennedy's declaration of consumer rights, a code of corresponding consumer duties is derived and it is shown that an extension of the traditional rights is a precondition for the execution of corresponding duties. The conclusion Schrader makes is that extended consumer rights are both a precondition and a call for morally responsible consumer citizenship.

Karl-Johan Bonnedahl and Jessica Eriksson outline movements towards a new discourse on sustainable development and argue that to reach sustainable economic organisation, the dominating market discourse, guiding mainstream organising, must be critically assessed. Such an assessment must both address underlying ethical assumptions as well as concepts of economic organisation (allocation, governance, throughput efficiency), which need to be changed to overcome the inertia working against movements to sustainable economic organisation.

Tommy Jensen argues for a new ethics in relation to sustainable development. A Jonasian view on morality is presented in which a morality of fear, a belonging categorical imperative and two axioms, are essential. If a Jonasian ethics is approved for, then it is possible for business scholars to pursue real alternatives to the current myth of progress and to judge those decisions that endanger human existence, or risk the essence and idea of man, as immoral.

Dallas Hanson illustrates through his book review that a leading American politician forged in a hard land was hard with land during his whole life. The point is that not only does sustainable development involve a consideration of future generations, but also that we need to understand and learn that the pattern of sustainability at any point in time helps create contemporary generations.

Andrew Jamison and Johan Sandström illustrate in their book/film review that when one of the more serious sustainability advocates in world politics, Al Gore, calls the climate change issue a moral issue, it is an individual morality he calls for in which we need to keep on buying and making things that we do not need, just as long as they are 'green'.

Finally, editing this issue has been a challenge and a pleasure and our thanks go to all of the authors and reviewers who have made a contribution to the issue.

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Notes

¹On the Conference of Presidents at the European parliament in Brussels, 2 February 2005.

²See the network for a post-autistic economy, <http://www.paecon.net>.