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‘Needle and Stick’ save the world: Sustainable development and the universal child

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This text deals with a problem concerning processes of the productive power of knowledge. We draw on so called poststructural theories challenging the classical image of thought – as hinged upon a representational logic identifying entities in a rigid sense – when formulating a problem concerning the gap between knowledge and the object of knowledge. More specifically we are looking at this problem in the contexts of sustainable development and childhood using illustrating examples in order to test the validity of these theoretical accounts. The examples we use range from internationally agreed documents claiming universality concerning environmental protection and childhood to national curricula for the pre-school to a Swedish governmentally produced and distributed TV-series called *Needle and Stick save the world*, addressing the issue of sustainable development. In short, we wish to problematise the rigid positions of the child and the human being in relation to nature.

Keywords: sustainable development; childhood; education; epistemology; social organisation; power/knowledge

Introduction

We are travelling through space. In a computer generated continuous take, the camera – simulating a tracking shot – slides past the sun and then (presumably) Mercury and Venus. The music on the soundtrack is bombastic, providing a pompous super hero theme of sorts. As earth slides into view the camera lingers and the titles are superimposed on the image of the earth. They read: ‘Needle and Stick save the world’,² accompanied by a sombre voice-over stating the same. (Utbildningsradion, 2009)

Thus concludes the opening shot of the Swedish governmentally produced educational TV-series *Needle and Stick save the world* (*Needle and Stick*) (Utbildningsradion, 2009) intended to function as ‘a supportive material for teaching about sustainable development in early childhood education’ (Nildén, 2009, p. 1, our translation).

Needle and Stick consists of ten nine-minute long episodes that all deal with different environmental aspects all relating to the greater framework of sustainable development. Episode one deals with the recycling of glass and newspapers, episode two with the pollution of the sea, episode three with the recycling of batteries and

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episode four with composting, etc. In every episode a specific example relating to the overall theme of the episode is used to facilitate teaching about sustainable development.

In a Swedish context, the tradition of producing educational TV aimed specifically at an early childhood education audience can be traced back to the late 1960s and the early 1970s when the public committee TRU (Television and Radio in Education) was assigned the task of producing educational TV following state guidelines and directions (Lindgren, 2003). These productions were then broadcasted by the Swedish Broadcast Corporation, *Swedish Radio*, ensuring a wide circulation with the potential to reach all of the population with access to radio and/or television. Swedish public television, in this sense, has a fairly long tradition of functioning as a backup system to the family, engineered to ensure the maintenance of the welfare state by supporting parents in raising their children. Together with the new child institutions of the welfare state, educational television provided a means for disseminating central values regarding the role of childhood in relation to society. Educational television can be thought of as an instrument employed by the state when shaping and governing the family in a manner that coincides with the overall intentions of the welfare institutions (Sandin, 2003, p. 16). The implications of this tradition is that, from a Swedish point of view, the importance of state produced educational television reaches well beyond the impact it has on the lives of individual children. One of the key roles of educational television is to provide a public platform where childhood is approached in terms of 'an equal opportunities project' (Lindgren, 2003, p. 89). As such, it provides a sphere where issues of social inequalities can be addressed and where social injustices can be battled beyond the control of the family. The political function of Swedish educational TV – as an instrument for governing families and for shaping a welfare state – hints at the potential impact harboured by a production such as *Needle and Stick*, not only within the specific context of the early childhood education setting but also, in a wider sense, within the social sphere of the family and within the population at large.

Given the political importance of Swedish educational television, it seems reasonable to approach a production such as *Needle and Stick* in terms of a paradigmatic expression that can provide insights into the abstract over-codings of a current paradigm and not simply as a TV-series with little or no importance beyond the limited context of early childhood education and the life-worlds of the individual children that makes up its primary audience. The paradigm, in this context, refers to the global discourse of sustainable development and the perceived threat of a pending environmental collapse.

Education has been targeted as an important means for realizing the goals set within this discourse. More specifically, education for sustainable development (ESD) has been designed as an internationally acknowledged instrument for disseminating central values and knowledge encapsulated within the universal documents concerning sustainable development. Recently, international reports on the importance of ESD have started to emphasize the significance of starting the dissemination as early as possible, encouraging early childhood institutions to engage with the issue of sustainable development (EPSD, 2010). This places *Needle and Stick* in an exceptional position when compared with other examples of educational TV which tackle issues that are not as pressing from a political point of view.

The opening shot of *Needle and Stick* raises questions about the relation between the individual human being and the fate of the world, implying a simple cause and effect relation between individual acts and global processes of

environmental change. This implied causality might be interpreted as an effect of a logic that relies on stable categories and rigid identities, resulting in a necessary division between what is human and what is non-human. It seems to presuppose a certain perspective on what it is to be human in the world, a perspective that is never explicitly acknowledged but rather presented as a universal given. As such, it gives rise to an ontological problem.

In this paper, we will deal with this problem in two steps; first, we will investigate what it is about *Needle and Stick*, more concretely, that indicates this tacit perspectivism, and second, we will ask ourselves how these concerns appear when translated into a philosophical problem? In short, if we were not to regard the ontological point of departure – placing human activity at its centre – as given, but as one possible way of understanding and explaining Being out of many, then we have encountered and recognized a familiar philosophical problem concerning the relation between power and knowledge, and the struggle between competing perspectives.

The first step relates to the use of images as projections of presupposed ideas about the relation between the human being and nature. In the opening shot, earth is depicted as the centre of the universe and humans as the centre of life on earth. These images are presented as givens, the links between their components – humans, earth, universe – are taken for granted and never explained. The images rely on us, the viewers, to make the connection and supply the components with a structure making them form a coherent pattern. Upon reflection then, the problem at hand seems to be connected to the presupposed notion that the viewer would in fact provide the images with the necessary structure for connecting seemingly unrelated entities, and at the same time perceiving the images as representations of universals. Our critical attitude towards the associations evoked by *Needle and Stick* is founded on a reluctance to embrace universals without reflecting on their premises or their origin (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 49).

The second step involves understanding this discomfort in terms of a philosophical problem. The coherence necessary for understanding *Needle and Stick* as a political instrument – in line with its stated purpose – is not contained within the material itself. In order for us to explain this coherence, as a way of problematising the tacit ontological notions of *Needle and Stick*, we need to trace the underlying logic beyond the material at hand. It seems as if by referring to something outside of it, *Needle and Stick* is legitimizing its claim to be able to project images as universals.

Turning to international agreements, forming the political foundation for the discussions on sustainable development and childhood, is one way of attempting to bridge the gap between the idea of nature and actual interactions with nature as depicted in *Needle and Stick*. In legal and political analysis, the documents usually referred to as central in the construction of this foundation are the Rio Declaration and its road map to implementation: the Agenda 21. However, the interpretational framework for these documents is supplied by the Stockholm Declaration of the 1972 Conference on Human Environment – marking the starting point for the international discussion on the environment as a coherent subject matter – and the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development report where the concept of sustainable development is introduced. Interestingly, when studying these documents we notice the same kind of logic at work. Just as in the case of *Needle and Stick*, the logic of the relation between nature and humans is not explicitly spelled out but implied through tacit assumptions only.

At this point, the problem begins to take shape. What is the relation between what we know about sustainable development and childhood and scientific

empiricism? Since we are unable to trace the components – humans, earth, universe – to a tangible foundation within the discourse, we feel compelled to look beyond it, asking ourselves what in our knowledge could actually be scientifically accounted for, and what has to be ascribed tacit notions apparently not grounded in official historical discourses but rather manifested as common sense?

Having reached a standstill in terms of grounding the underlying logic in concrete practices, we turn instead to theoretical inquiries dealing with ontological problems. We look more specifically into theories occupied, on a more abstract level, with the same sort of problem concerning the gap between knowledge and the object of knowledge. In order for us to be able to work with this problem we look for suitable theoretical tools that will allow us to facilitate the mapping out of our perceived problem. This will need to be a kind of theory that will allow us to work with empirical information as intuitive paradigmatic examples rather than in terms of deductive tools. A theoretical vantage point that allows for this is to question the premises for an image of knowledge always aiming at accounting for what is true and good in a natural sense.

All together, this makes for an endeavour to try out a theoretical challenge to tacit ontological notions – promoting stability and rigid identity at the expense of change and mobility – that appears to underpin education for sustainable development. We will use different examples – ranging from local practices to global documents – as singular momentary expressions illustrating the problem with founding political documents on universals.

Using illustrative examples from *Needle and Stick*, we will examine the simple cause and effect relation between individual acts of littering and a sustainable future. We will focus on this causality – a causality that appears to inform the overall rationale of the programme – in order to question the seeming naturalness of some of the ontological presuppositions. Here, we will work with the idea of a teleological journey. The teleological journey implies a strictly means-to-an-end interpretation of human activity, subordinating every human act, however mundane, to a greater good, turning being into labour (O'Doherty & O'Shea, 2005, p. 3). As such, it places the human being at the very centre of events, with her supposedly superior capacity to organize time and ability to act intentionally. She emerges as both the instigator and the subject of anything that happens along the pre-set path to the aspired goal.

This ontological position requires stability and rigid identities in order to work. It is dependent upon an interpretation of life in line with an Aristotelian tradition. We therefore raise the question: What life works? We will draw on Agamben's (2004) critique of Aristotle's definition of life; this definition depends on a logic of separation that we set out to problematise. The logic of separation makes it necessary to organize and divide in order to make sure that the path to the goal is efficiently structured. The goal of a community that rests on a foundation of the reasonable and the greater good is identified as the primary motivation for human labour, giving meaning and coordinating all human activities (May, 1993; ten Bos, 2005).

We will then look more closely at the specific role of education within the global project of sustainable development; in doing this, we understand education as a connective tissue which links the individual child and the future of the world together. Finally, we will summarize our arguments in some concluding remarks.

The smallest action makes the difference: The teleological journey at work

Like every other episode, the second episode of *Needle and Stick* is framed by a ceremony where the main protagonists, Needle and Stick, are awarded a special prize for clearing the earth of all garbage. In the midst of the congratulations and the cheering of the crowd, the ceremony is suddenly interrupted by an emergency call from the control room. A monitor displays a father who is about to throw a piece of garbage into a lake. As an immediate response, the woman in the control room – always scanning the world for violations against nature – cries out: ‘Come look! PANIC! PANIC! PANIC!’

Once again, Needle and Stick are given the assignment of saving the world by reclaiming the waste and by helping the ignorant father understand the assumed connection between his mundane act of indifference and the wellbeing of the natural environment.

Arriving at the scene of the crime – a wooden pier where the father and his two young daughters are idling in the sun – Stick reaches out just in time to catch the falling piece of garbage with a bag net. On the count of three, the woman in the control room presses a button which sedates the whole family. Needle bends down and whispers repeatedly in the sleeping father’s ear: ‘Don’t you see? You cannot throw paper and other waste into the water’.

Assuming ‘that man [sic] has acquired the power to transform his environment in countless ways’ (United Nations, 1972: Preamble, para 1), as stated in the Stockholm Declaration, governing mundane acts – such as the father throwing garbage in the lake – become essential for saving the world. The rhetoric at work here places human subjects and their activities at the ontological and epistemological point of departure (O’Doherty & O’Shea, 2005). This illustrates the transition from politically charged practices (exemplified in this case by the Stockholm/Rio Declarations) to a preconceived apprehension of the relations between human subjects and the natural environment – as portrayed in the scene described above, emphasizing the need to alter the behaviour of the father. What has been constructed within an international political debate³ has transformed into a Truth forming the foundation for further political initiatives working at a micro-level. Interestingly, making the individual act of throwing garbage in a lake into a potential obstruction of natural human development seems to be an embodiment of the logic of separation (ten Bos, 2005). As such, it functions to establish, again and again, the Aristotelian definition of humanity as individuals striving – through goal oriented activity (labour) – for a greater common good. Inactivity, it seems, comes to define the inhuman; thus the act of reclaiming the garbage not only neutralizes the threat of sabotaging the political project of sustainable development, but more importantly, it functions to humanize the subject.

Through ignorance or indifference we can do massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment on which our life and well being depend. Conversely, through fuller knowledge and wiser action, we can achieve for ourselves and our posterity a better life in an environment more in keeping with human needs and hopes. (United Nations, 1972: Preamble, para 6)

The above quote and the described scene from *Needle and Stick* both implicitly rely on an understanding of consciousness and rationality as positive constitutive forces propelling human actions and thoughts. Correspondingly, the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights (Human Rights Declaration) establishes that human beings 'are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. The project, then, is to combat ignorance and indifference – and not so much to protect the natural environment – using the image of an angel upon the shoulder of every human subject as a symbol for the human consciousness fuelling the constant need to work towards the goal of a greater good. The angel, embodied in this case by Needle, reaches down to enlighten the ignorant father and to correct his wrong behaviour so as to reinstate him as a fully fledged human subject fulfilling his part of the teleological journey where people 'propel social progress, create social wealth, develop science and technology and, through their hard work, continuously transform the human environment' (United Nations, 1972: Preamble, para 5).

Shifting focus from the father to his two young daughters it could be argued that the main objective of *Needle and Stick* is to familiarize children with a kind of humanism embodied by and projected through a teleological journey that motivates human activity. Hence, the father is not the primary concern here; he is rather a means to an end, facilitating the humanization of children. As '[t]he family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society' (United Nations, 1948: Article 16, para 3), the father, as the assumed head of the family, has the responsibility to monitor and govern the development of the children into responsible citizens (League of Nations, 1924: Principle 5; United Nations, 1948: Article 26, para 2; United Nations, 1959: Principle 10; United Nations, 1989: Article 29, para d). Accordingly, while reclaiming a piece of garbage, Needle and Stick, in a broader scheme, set out to produce activity from a moment of inactivity and add a sense of intentionality to just idling on the wooden pier by the lake.

Stopping time, the woman in the control room is producing a fixed and ordered state out of ongoing movement, creating space for the intervention of conscience in the shape of Needle. The idea of the all-seeing control room – a panopticon of sorts – does not seem to be so much about disciplining and repressing human subjects as it is a way of illustrating how the angel on our shoulder serves as an ever-present guide, disguised as a universal conscience, keeping us on a predetermined path. This may seem unproblematic at first; however, if it is a matter of administering policy through the appeal to a universal conscience, rather than administering undisputable scientific facts, then the policy, being founded on universal claims, is in fact establishing the normativity that it claims to derive from. The point is that the relation between *Needle and Stick* and its presumed foundation presupposes a fixed order of things without recognizing any concrete utterances of power.

Foucault (1980) suggests that power is a force not only liable for repressing and limiting actions or thoughts, but also capable of producing the same (through the use of self-regulation manifested as consciences) turning power into knowledge. As such, it is a prominent feature interwoven in the creation of all knowledge, since it determines the very conditions for reflecting upon something. It is this positive kind of power that enables specific claims to become natural or transcendent, seemingly out of reach for questioning and beyond specific perspectives. Power understood this way cannot simply be viewed as an utterance of domination but needs also to be treated as part of the grain of knowledge itself. Simply put, a positive, constitutive, kind of power is part of the determination of what we think of ourselves, what we make of our world.

Treating the values upon which *Needle and Stick* rely on as givens obscures the fact that they are in fact the result of politically charged discussions (Birnie &

Boyle, 2002). Consequently, it seems to be a matter of furthering a tacit kind of perspectivism, dictating the greater good of a universal teleological journey, excluding other potential ontologies. This type of universal claim is also manifested in the opening principle of the Rio Declaration, a principle that very much sets the tone for environmental protection policy in general. It states that: 'Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature'. Not only does the above quote imply that environmental policy falls within the ambit of a humanistic project, but it also illustrates how the logic of separation may be considered a precondition for the idea of productive life in the first place. As a result it establishes a definite centre and a periphery facilitating the perpetual evaluation of humanism.

What life works? Childhood and the future of the world

A recurring segment of *Needle and Stick* consists of the expert 'Stickan' being called upon to explain where to dispose of various types of waste. Stickan is referred to in the companion guide as a 'scatterbrained know-all' (Nildén, 2009: 1, our translation). Every episode displays a different type of transgression of what is being treated as the prevailing environmental code of conduct. Each time a misdemeaning adult has been sedated by the woman in the control room, and Stick has reclaimed whatever piece of garbage it may be, they turn to Stickan (via a monitor in the control room) for advice. He is dressed up in a white lab coat and sits behind a cluttered desk in a messy office. This context is keeping him at a distance from the natural environment that he claims to protect and know. Nature, as contained in his office by disparate bits and pieces (the lake for instance is represented by a bowl of water), is turned into theatrical props creating a suitable (and harmless) backdrop for his lectures rather than dynamic environments with which to interact. Each time he explains the different segments of the organization of waste management, concerning materials such as Band-Aids, batteries, glass and newspapers, etc. He focuses on where to dispose of the waste and how the different waste management procedures are structured, but he does not address the issue of why upholding the waste management procedures is a crucial feature of environmental sustainability in the first place. This is not in line with the stated purpose of *Needle and Stick* in an educational context, which is to emphasize the important connections between individual acts of protecting the natural environment and sustainable development as a global project (Nildén, 2009, p. 1).

Turning to Agamben (2004) and his reasoning about Aristotle's attempts to define the concept of life – establishing a foundation for philosophical thought on the human condition and as such formulating a framework for western humanism – it seems as if Aristotle and Stickan are struggling with the same problem. Agamben suggests:

It is important to note that Aristotle in no way defines what life is: he limits himself to breaking it down, by isolating the nutritive function, in order then to rearticulate it in a series of distinct and correlated faculties or potentialities. (Agamben, 2004, p. 14)

Similarly, Stickan appears unable to define sustainable development as a coherent concept, and ends up, instead, breaking it down into infrastructural practicalities. Stickan is addressing the universal issue of sustainable development solely by discussing these isolated practicalities despite the fact that the curriculum of the

Swedish preschool and the companion guide explicitly refer to the importance of clarifying ‘how individual acts can influence the natural environment’ (Skolverket, 1998). This goes to show how difficult it is to bridge the gap between universal values and mundane acts, indicating that the teleological journey in this case is neither self-evident nor natural.

For example, when explaining what to do with a Band-Aid thrown into a toilet bowl, Stickan emphasizes the importance of keeping certain kinds of material away from the sewage system in order to avoid stoppage, thus lingering on an infrastructural level rather than addressing the supposed environmental impact of a Band-Aid in the sewage. The greater environmental impact of the act of throwing – relating to sustainable development – seems to be taken for granted and what is more, utilized as an unquestionable imperative for whatever preventive action is subsequently suggested.

In this context, focusing on practicalities, such as where a specific piece of waste should be put, also indicates a preconception concerning children’s engagement with, and understanding of, the tacit notions of sustainable development. Children everywhere are understood to be ‘highly aware supporters of environmental thinking’ (United Nations, 1992b: Ch 25, para 12), but as is evident in the example from *Needle and Stick*, the substance of this thinking is constantly treated as a given and never elaborated further or scrutinized. This seems to indicate a certain reluctance to touch on the underlying values of environmental issues. It presupposes that the environment is unproblematic in itself, and that it is a stable entity that does not change unless tampered with. Since children are expected to ‘inherit the responsibility of looking after the Earth’ (United Nations, 1992b: Ch 25, para 12) the fate of individual children is inescapably interconnected with the overarching goal of a teleological journey without discussing its actual terms. Again, it relates to the idea that movement and activity is only rendered meaningful when synchronized with a fixed trajectory moving from point A to point B, from a state of being lesser to a state of being greater (McInnes & Beech, 2005).

The child, when placed along this trajectory, is important not so much because of its inherent individuality, but because it is manifested as ‘an instance of the “human” through which the history of humanity could also be told’ (Castañeda, 2003, p. 13). In this quote, Castañeda is drawing on a tradition of thought linking the state of childhood with human development via an already fixed trajectory.

The role of education

A prominent link between the individual child and the future of the world is education. The importance of education is very much highlighted in the operative part of the Stockholm Declaration. The nineteenth principle reads:

Education in environmental matters, for the younger generation as well as adults, giving due consideration to the underprivileged, is essential in order to broaden the basis for *an enlightened opinion and responsible conduct by individuals*, enterprises and communities in protecting and improving the environment in its *full human dimension*. (UN, 1972. Emphasis added)

The first part of the nineteenth principle (quoted above) seems to rely on two prominent features; ‘the responsible conduct of individuals’ and the goal of reaching an environment which reflects the ‘full human dimension’. Not only does this

universal document reaffirm a particular set of values forming the foundation for social organization at large, but it also prescribes specific methods for the successful distribution of the values as universal and thus unquestionable. One of these methods, then, is education, as stated in the quote and as reaffirmed in the twenty-first principle of the Rio Declaration. The nineteenth principle of the Stockholm Declaration continues:

It is also essential that mass media of communications avoid contributing to the deterioration of the environment, but, on the contrary, disseminates information of an educational nature on the need to protect and improve the environment in order to enable man to develop in every respect. (UN, 1972)

From this perspective, *Needle and Stick* appears to shoulder a great responsibility in as far as 'disseminating information of an educational nature' making it in fact a key instrument for the Swedish implementation of an international environmental commitment. This position is reiterated in the global action plan on sustainable development adopted by the Rio Conference: Agenda 21, chapter twenty-five, paragraph fourteen. From a Swedish point of view, Utbildningsradion – the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company – is precisely such an instrument for disseminating politically designed goals, as requested by the Stockholm and Rio Conferences (Lindgren, 2006, p. 12). However, as these political goals seem to rely on tacit notions that have never been explicitly addressed, the role of Utbildningsradion as a political instrument appears somewhat ambiguous. It not only functions to advance negotiated political agreements but also – and herein lies the problem – to further a presupposed knowledge seemingly indispensable for the understanding of the universal documents.

Another seemingly taken-for-granted truth, in this context, is the linking of the individual child to the future of a sustainable society. Moving from issues of state commitment to protect the natural environment to state commitment to protect the child, a few striking similarities appear. Where the Stockholm Declaration talks about 'improving the environment in its full human dimension' and protecting the environment 'in order to enable man to develop in every respect' (United Nations, 1972: Principle 19) the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes an obligation where 'States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to ... [t]he development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities *to their fullest potential*' (United Nations, 1989: Article 29, para 1a, emphasis added). Again, this implies a tacit notion insofar as describing the goal driven journey prescribing superiority to the human subject. The state of childhood is only valuable, it seems, if it is construed as an early stage leading up to a greater state of becoming a responsible citizen. The universal child, as a necessary precondition for this responsible citizen, makes way for in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child declaring the importance of '[t]he preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society' (United Nations, 1989: Article 29, para 1d). Responsibility, in this context, seems meaningful only if construed as a goal-oriented and useful activity aimed at the betterment of the community. The idea of a responsible life as it appears in these documents seems to correspond with a notion of the human being as defined and distinguished through labour and activity, and that makes for a point of departure for traditional liberal political theory which presupposes a constant lack and the filling of a need (May, 2005, p. 125).

If, as suggested by Serres, all kinds of life work, however, then the classificatory system based on this logic of separation seems to fail as it treats human

labour as exceptional. Serres proposes that: 'Animals work, as do living organisms.'
He continues:

The organism gets order and energy, chews them up, sorts them, classifies them, and re-forms its own order and its own energy, eliminating the losses. Does a miller do otherwise? Is the treatment of aggregates in a river another activity? What is production in a factory? (Serres, 2007: 86)

Final thoughts

Going back to the scene at the wooden pier, there are multiple ways of understanding the situation, each one adding different aspects to this analysis. Looking at the examples above, we asked whether the individual act of throwing garbage in the lake could be interpreted as a potential obstruction of natural human development, and as such, manifesting and perpetuating a logic of separation. This potential manifestation, then, would be due to humanization of the subject (the father) and transformation of the non-productive subject into a productive – labouring – citizen. Through goal-oriented activity (acting in line with improvement of society) he is made human, and as such he is reclaimed as an active and useful instrument working for the teleological journey.

It seems that the logic of separation requires sacrificing moments of idling by the lake in order to focus on rational choices rendering the teleological journey efficient. The framework of the project of sustainable development, then, seems to require not only a specific perception of subjectivity, society and organization, but it also lays fundamental claims on our interpretation of time and temporality. This relates to the teleological linearity as reflected within global documents and local practices founded on the premises set by these documents. Linearity is required in order to organize the human subject in accordance with a predetermined path leading to an already set goal. The journey, in this sense, not only presupposes linear time, it actually produces it. Without the journey, connecting the idea of the past – the state of being lesser – with the idea of the future – the state of being greater – the concept of temporality appears to lose its conditional parameters.

The project of producing sustainable development, seen in this light, emerges in part as a strategy for escaping a general sense of meaninglessness. It helps to construct a conceptual framework where time and individuals are ordered hierarchically according to the teleological journey, giving all subjects a sense of meaning in their joint striving towards a common goal. This relates to the logic of separation as this logic both demands and is dependent upon rigid identities subordinated to fixed and dualistic categories such as human/non-human, man/woman, and adult/child. These identities are necessary components in an image of thought relying on linearity and the logic of separation. From this perspective, the children on the wooden pier are not conceived of as particularly unique in themselves but rather as outcomes of a specific kind of temporality and as natural members of a general category. In our empirical examples, then, childhood does not come across as an anthropological fact but as a construction that functions to render life meaningful, applying a sense of structure and wholeness to otherwise seemingly 'unconnected now-points' (May, 1997, p. 86). On the one hand, this seems altogether harmless, maybe even necessary, but the fact that anything that cannot be readily described in terms of its utility or as a goal-driven activity is disregarded in the TV-series is

unsettling since arguably there must be something more to life than striving towards common goals that are always positioned somewhere beyond existence.

In addition to humanizing the subject and linking the individual (and individual acts) to a teleological journey, the scene by the lake allows for yet another aspect. It can be understood in terms of 'replacing the infinite with the finite' in order to protect mankind from 'uncontrollable infinity' (ten Bos, 2009, p. 81n). Nature seems – within global documents dealing with sustainable development – to represent one such infinity. ten Bos argues that the myth of Noah and the Ark teaches us that 'it is always possible to construct an inner world in an hostile world. It is the first time human beings create an endosphere which does not need nature anymore for protection and immunity' (ten Bos, 2009, p. 80).

What if, then, the recovery of the garbage from the lake is not so much about living 'a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature' (United Nations, 1992a: Principle 1), but instead about utilizing human technologies – via the organization of waste management and energy infrastructure as described in detail by Stickan – for the protection of humanity 'against the omnipotence of nature' (ten Bos, 2009, p. 80). This would imply that the project of sustainable development can be interpreted as a set of politically charged practices serving to create 'a context-free house, the ultimate niche, an absolute island' (ten Bos, 2009, p. 80). The project of sustainable development, in this light, stands out as part of an overarching project of humanitarianism (Douzinas, 2007), aiming at subsuming nature in a pre-given order founded on linearity and rationality. It is an attempt to make nature appear manageable and to subordinate it to categories constructed and enforced by humans. The universal documents concerned seem to be preoccupied with promoting an image of nature as wrapped around its centre, i.e. humanity. This act can, in turn, be understood in terms of making the human experience appear meaningful, giving purpose and importance to each individual human within the scope of such a humanistic project. Following this trail of thoughts, the pending threat of a natural disaster – claimed to be caused by human actions and human inactivity (for a fuller discussion on the pending environmental threat and human agency, see WCED, 1987, p. 13) – may be perceived as a positive driving force rather than a negative incitement for global cooperation. Consequently, educational discourse on recycling and acting in an environmentally friendly way would, in this way, produce both sustainable development and pending environmental disaster simultaneously. Nietzsche touches upon this problem in relation to upholding prevailing morality. He writes:

Assuming that we could entirely abolish the danger, the grounds for fear, then we would have abolished this morality as well: it would no longer be necessary, it *would deem itself* on longer necessary! (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 88)

Another take on the moment by the lake is that it may in fact present itself as a possible opening up for a very different understanding of the humanistic epistemology as sketched above. We wish to make two remarks.

First, what if, contrary to the logic of separation, we are unwilling to consider idling by the lake as inactivity? If, in line with Serres (2007), we posit that all life works, then idling is just as much an activity as recycling waste. Perhaps then the problem does not revolve around relieving the father from responsibility but hesitating to subordinate the desirable act (recycling) to a greater scheme founded on transcendental values: values which are treated as givens and rarely troubled within the discourse. The real effects of not handling waste in accordance with governing recommendations become entangled with and burdened by these values to the extent

that the act itself must be thought of in terms of a teleological end, thereby depriving it of its potentiality as an 'unconnected now-point' with little or no relevance for the betterment of humanity. Responsibility does not have to be related and connected with a teleological goal always out of reach. Removing the teleological goal may, on the contrary, open up for understanding responsibility in a pluralistic and relational way instead.

Responsibility based on plural relations connects – in a non-hierarchical way – acts, subjects and entities, not to a common goal but to each other through mutually constitutive influences. What if, for example, the act of throwing garbage in the lake is – instead of being determined by human intentions – assumed to produce subjectivity in collaboration with the acting father? In this respect, the very act is constitutive of the human subject, but not dependent upon the human being as a constant centre of concern. The human, in this sense, is merely a relational part entangled with every other part of the natural environment. Its individual acts, therefore, are not necessarily decisive for the future development of humanity. Barad (2007) elaborates:

Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and time, but rather that space and time, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future (2007, p. ix).

Barad's thoughts on individuality as continuously constituted through intra-actions raise questions not only about rigid subjectivity, but it also demonstrates just how fragile the dominating conception of space and time is. By linking relational time with relational identity, she points to the common foundational image of thought producing linear time and rigid identities as natural entities emerging through politically charged practices. Her theorizing opens up different ways of conceptualizing human life and social organization by stressing the inherent perspectivism of the prevailing image of thought. It is not about introducing a better image of thought but about pointing to and describing the gap that this dominant tradition of thought seeks to hide by always claiming that it originates from what is preconceived as true and as a consequence often disguised as common sense (Spindler, 2004, p. 17).

Second, the idea of perspectivism can be linked to the governmentality-aspect of *Needle and Stick* in that it illustrates how knowledge and power are produced in a mutually constitutive relation. When power is construed as a positive force making political claims appear natural, the overall account of knowledge is affected. What is generally held as acceptable knowledge is not driven by an evolutionary logic about the nature of things but is perpetuated by different expressions of power implying that 'there is no knowledge; there are knowledges' (May, 1997, p. 2). Based on our examples, the angel on the shoulder – as personified by Needle – seems to provide an illustration of self-regulation in accordance with this positive definition of power. From this vantage point, it becomes difficult to interpret this humanistic project as anything but a possible perspective on the relation between humans and the natural environment.

In sum, the logic at work within the universal documents on sustainable development, as a foundation for describing life, seems to inevitably lead to

exclusion, an exclusion of all other possibilities of perceiving life. To describe and identify the community in this sense is to establish an account of the community at the cost of other possible descriptions (Nancy, 1991). Instead, Agamben suggests:

It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues on so-called human rights and values. (Agamben, 2004, p. 16)

It seems then that the problem we have attempted to focus on is a matter of seriously discussing and problematising a taken-for-granted ontological foundation. To continuously renegotiate the boundaries of humanity, by differentiating exceptional categories from entities with no legal standing, without addressing these issues, is to confirm the validity of a given perspective without reflection.

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Notes

¹ Equal authors.

² In Swedish the titles read 'Barr och Pinne räddar världen'. 'Needle and Stick save the world' is our translation.

³ The first principle of the Rio Declaration and the fifth of the Stockholm Declaration establish that the human being is at the centre of political concern propelling social progress.

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