

# Another dream

## Educating for a future

Ólafur Páll Jónsson

Professor of Philosophy, School of Education, University of Iceland

### 1 A dream

Facing global challenges of climate change, armed conflicts, growing inequalities, and AI encroachment on humanity, the biggest challenge for the educational systems in the affluent countries in the west is to help the young and the old to dream differently. The Icelandic poet Steinn Steinarr says in one of his poems: “In each person’s dream, his collapse is immanent”. The grey present and the bleak future we see today show us that not only is personal collapse present in the dream of the individual, but a collapse of humanity is present in the collective dream we are living out today. But what is this dream we are now falling victims to? It is the dream of mastery over nature, making it provide for our daily needs, and turning it into a safe, gentle, and foreseeable world. It is the dream of comfort and security.

Despite the constant changes that humanity has witness since the dawn of the industrial revolution, changes some say are happening faster than ever before, the dream of mastery over nature has been remarkably stable. In Iceland, elements of this dream were manifested around the middle of last century in as diverse forms as the availability of rubber boots to keep the feet dry and insulated concrete walls to keep the weather out. Later the power of the waterfalls was turned into electricity for homes and industry, and thermal water was channelled into people’s homes to keep them warm and cosy. Now the rubber boots have been upgraded to comfortable cars and the houses

not only keep the weather out but are a world of comfort. The state of the planet, however, shows us that while this dream of security and comfort has come true, we must learn to dream differently.

To have a dream is to be optimistic and yet realistic, recognizing that what is presently out of reach might be brought closer by a joint effort. When Martin Luther King said he had a dream, he was not only talking about some lovely but actually impossible fairy-tale. No, he was talking about real change he thought was possible even if out of reach from where he was currently situated. That dream was about fundamental changes in the most basic values of society. That dream has partly become true, partly not, and many people still work diligently to keep it alive.

The dream of controlling nature, of making people the masters of their own destiny through making nature the servant of humanity, has been realized with such thoroughness that nature is not only a servant, but has been oppressed in such a way that its position is better described as slavery. Nature has been exploited in all imaginable ways, for while we have striven to realize this dream of mastery, we have lost all sense of a limit. While gaining control over nature, we have lost control over ourselves. At the same time as the colonial powers lost control over territories around the globe, nature itself was colonized to an ever-greater extent. It is this colonial dream we must give up.

In 1957 the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright was already concerned about how technology – developed to realize the dream of security and comfort – had turned into a master dictating people’s lives:

The obvious fact ... that knowledge can be equally used for good proposals as for bad ends, has been one reason why not only mankind’s self-acquired happiness, but also his self-inflicted suffering has acquired previously unknown dimensions. The increased possibilities of technologically controlling reality have also increased man’s desire[s] in a way that has become dangerous to his spiritual equilibrium. Technology, created as the servant of man, has become his master. (von Wright, 1993, p. 127)<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> von Wright talks about desires in plural in the original Swedish text as Kari Väyrynen points out in his paper “Nemesis Naturea? G.H. von Wright as an environmental thinker”.

The dream I want to talk about today, is not about mastery over nature but about harmony. If this new dream will be realized, not only will the fundamental values of societies around the globe change, so will the living conditions for humanity. Or I should rather say: The living conditions might be restored, saving us from the collapse immanent in the old dream of mastery.

## 2 Green growth in the Nordic Region

The first United nation's conferences on the environment – some with a strong focus on education – were held half a century ago; the Stockholm conference in 1972 and the Tbilisi conference in 1977.<sup>2</sup> Responses were slow and still fall short of taking the situation of the world seriously. The Nordic countries are no exception, they seem to be stuck in the old dream despite policies that talk about a greener future.

In 2019 the Nordic Council of Ministers published a little booklet – 52 pages with many beautiful pictures – titled *A GOOD LIFE IN A SUSTAINABLE NORDIC REGION: Nordic Strategy for Sustainable Development 2013-2025*.<sup>3</sup> In the opening section, we can read that:

The Nordic Strategy for Sustainable Development is the overriding and cross-sectoral framework for the work of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and is in line with the ambitions and goals of the 2030 Agenda. (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 7)

In the introduction, we are given the following definition of sustainable development:

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Strategy for Sustainable Development provides general guidelines for the coming years. Sustainable development involves meeting the needs of present generations without

---

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, Sweden, 5-16 June 1972, (<https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/stockholm1972>). Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education, Tbilisi, USSR, 14-26 October 1977 (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000032763>).

<sup>3</sup> *A Good Life in a Sustainable Nordic Region: Nordic Strategy for Sustainable Development 2013-2025* (<https://www.norden.org/en/publication/good-life-sustainable-nordic-region-nordic-strategy-sustainable-development-2013-2025>).

compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 4)

Readers might be surprised by the definition taken directly from the Brundtland report of 1987, as if nothing had happened during the three decades that set these publications apart. I shall not dwell on this dusty take on sustainability but look closer at the very concept of “green growth”. What does it mean? And how is it presented in the strategy? In this publication, the word “growth” appears 28 times (every second page on average) and the phrase “green growth” nine times. The tone is given already in the introduction:

Green growth has become a key objective that many countries and regions have set up to meet the major environmental, climatic and energy challenges while maintaining good economic growth. The market for green solutions is growing, and there is potential for the Nordic region to strengthen its market position. The initiative of the Nordic Prime Ministers for green growth plays an important role in this context. Greater competitiveness and growth will be attained through more effective use of resources, more sustainable use and supply of energy, and more precise legislation about and pricing of natural resources. (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, pp. 8-9)

“Green growth” was not the invention of the Nordic strategy report but is a common goal in various national and international policy documents. This is the two-line definition of the concept offered by OECD:

Green Growth means fostering economic growth and development, while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies. (OECD, n.d.)

In the Nordic Strategy and the OECD publications the idea of green growth appears as such common-sense that it needs no justification. It is presented as an idea of good management: Nature is a service provider and to ensure human well-being (which is the measure of all things) people must make sure not to deplete it.

The Nordic Strategy takes up the idea of green growth in a most uncritical way. But do we need growth in a society of abundance? While looking at the average goods people in the Nordic Region have – their salaries and material wealth – I

see no need for growth. The annual GDP of the Nordic countries ranges from 55 to 100,000 USD per person, situating them all among the top 20 richest countries in the world (Statista, 2024). If the Nordic countries need to grow, in economic terms, to sustain a good life, what then about those countries which don't make it to the list of the top 20? If the objective is environmental protection and restoration, then economic growth, whichever colour term is used to qualify it, is hardly the means. We don't need more goods, but less.

The very craving for more economic growth for the Nordic region becomes even less plausible – or perhaps flat out ridiculous – when we consider the ecological footprint of our region. One way to measure the impact people have on the planet through their daily living, is to calculate what is referred to as the “earth overshoot day”. It is defined thus:

Earth Overshoot Day marks the date when humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year. (Global Footprint Network, n.d.)

Life on the planet will only be sustainable when the earth overshoot day is no earlier than December 31<sup>st</sup>. Globally, the day has been around the end of July in the last years. Our living is not only unsustainable, it is very much so. How are the Nordic Countries doing according to this measure? Here are the overshoot days for each of the Nordic countries, with an estimation for Iceland which is not included in the data from the Global Footprint Network:

Iceland, February (?)<sup>4</sup>  
Denmark, March 16  
Norway, April 12  
Finland, April 12  
Sweden, April 21

Sweden has the best record with the annual ecological budget lasting almost one third of the year. But being the best falls far short of doing well. Principles of good housekeeping tell us that this is not good, it is awful housekeeping.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Ecological Footprint Network does not publish data for Iceland. Estimates for Iceland vary greatly, but most calculations locate the overshoot day for Iceland no later than the end of February (see Jóhannesson, Davíðsdóttir & Heinonen, 2018).

The earth does not need more competitiveness in the Nordic Region, it needs less global need for competitiveness. We need more cooperation and less competition.<sup>5</sup> What I see in the Nordic Strategy is a vision stuck in the old dream. Green growth as presented there entails continued mastery over nature, continued domination, continued exploitation. Green growth does not hint at uprooting the natural slavery that has been normalized during the last centuries. When I look at the actual situation of the planet, and the quality of life in the Nordic Region and the resources needed to produce this quality, the call for growth sounds utterly out of place. In times of gross overexploitation of almost all natural resources, “green growth” is little other than a play of words masquerading grey reality. It is as if the colonial powers of the past, while recognizing the immorality of the slave-trade, would have suggested “humane slavery” to replace the ongoing “cruel slavery”.

Someone might object to this assimilation of slavery and natural exploitation, insisting that “humane slavery” is a contradiction in terms, unlike “green growth” which may be objectionable but not a contradiction. I agree that “humane slavery” is a contradiction in terms but, I’d add, so is “green growth”. As it is used in the Nordic strategy and in the publications of OECD and elsewhere, the growth that is called for may not be as grey or black as the fossil fuel driven growth of the past two or three centuries, but there is nothing green about it. Even if slaves were treated in such a way that they would not die prematurely and were able to reproduce sufficiently for their masters not to run out of labour force in the future – what might be referred to as sustainable slavery – that would not make slavery humane. Likewise, economic policy that aims for continued mastery over nature, continued exploitation of overexploited resources, where nature is primarily seen as the provider of commodities, where human interest is set above all else, does not merit the adjective “green”, even if such exploitation could be extended into the future.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Stephen Sterling on this point, where he talks about the paradoxes of education (Sterling, 2001).

### 3 Growing green through transformative education

In all the talk about sustainability these days it often is forgotten what exactly is to be sustained. Is it the planet, nature, healthy environment, ...? None of those are proper goals for politics or education. The planet will be there, even if we make it uninhabitable. Nature will continue, even if it will be completely transformed. "Healthy environment" comes closer to be a proper objective for politics and education. But then we must ask: What do we mean by "healthy" and "environment"? We get closer to a proper objective of sustainability if we think of the project as living a good life within the limits set by the natural environment on which we depend, and which provides the boundary conditions for all living.

Sustainability as a social and political goal is about sustaining the good life for all people on the planet. The title of the Nordic Strategy paper is therefore quite appropriate: *A Good Life in a Sustainable Nordic Region*. But the strategy does not critically examine the conception of the good life, perhaps assuming something like "the Nordic way of living".

In his book *Earth in Mind*, originally published in 1994, David Orr criticises what he calls six myths of education. The second myth on his list is that with enough knowledge and technology we can learn to "manage planet earth" (p. 9). This myth, Orr notes, has a certain lure to it: "It appeals to our fascination with digital readouts, computers, buttons and dials". And now, with AI flowing through our consciousness watering our dreams for a better world, the lure has only increased. But Orr says this is a myth:

... the complexity of the earth and its life systems can never be safely managed. The ecology of the top inch of the topsoil is still largely unknown as is its relationship to the larger systems of the biosphere. What might be managed, however, is us: human desires, economies, politics, and communities. But our attention is caught by those things that avoid the hard choices implied by politics, morality, ethics, and common sense. It makes far better sense to reshape ourselves to fit a finite planet than to attempt to reshape the planet to fit our infinite wants. (Orr, 2004, p. 9)

Rather than craving more consumption driven by unsustainable conceptions of the good life, we need a *new* conception of the good life. We need education where learners are encouraged to adopt a critical attitude towards their own needs and wishes, where flourishing is not conceived of as winning the race against the person next to you, and where quality of life is not measured by economic wealth but in terms of moral and political values such as equality, democracy, and harmony with nature.<sup>6</sup>

Anyone familiar with debates about sustainability education for the last decades recognizes that I am not saying anything new, a sad testimony to the fact that the things most fundamentally in need of change, have not changed. Chapter 1 of the Brundtland report begins thus:

The Earth is one but the world is not. We all depend on one biosphere for sustaining our lives. Yet each community, each country, strives for survival and prosperity with little regard for its impact on others. Some consume the Earth's resources at a rate that would leave little for future generations. Others, many more in number, consume far too little and live with the prospect of hunger, squalor, disease, and early death. (UNESCO, 1987, Ch.1, §1)

This was in 1987. Gro Harlem Brundtland and her team began their report pointing out that “some consume the Earth's resources at a rate that would leave little for future generations”. Who are those “some” who overconsume the earth's resources? The Nordic Countries are certainly among those “some” given their overshoot days falling within the first four months of the year. The only way for us, the people in the affluent north, to continue like this is to count on other people to enjoy much less than would be their fair share. And that is what we have done in the almost forty years since the Brundtland report came out.

Youth in the Nordic countries are more critical than the authors of the Nordic Strategy. In a publication about young changemakers for sustainability in the Nordic Countries, published in the same year as the Strategy plan, the young

---

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of harmony with nature, see the paper by Jordan and Kristjánsson, “Sustainability, virtue ethics, and the virtue of harmony with nature”.



people describe a transition from the old dream of mastery to a new dream of harmony:

The sustainable changemakers do not see sustainable consumption and living as a sacrifice, and prefer to highlight the positive aspects and personal benefits. Highlighting the positive sides of sustainable lifestyles could serve as a counterculture to current habits of consumption, waste, food, and transportation. The sustainable changemakers could be seen as role models, portraying not only how people can live sustainably but also how they can actually lead a better life. (Ravnbøl and Neergaard, 2019, p. 23)

For a green future, we need not only new knowledge, new technology and new politics, we need a new conception of the good life. The young people know this, they agree with David Orr when he says we need to change our needs to fit the earth rather than trying to make the earth supply for our infinite wants. Almost a century ago, an American forester and philosopher, Aldo Leopold, wrote:

When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impacts of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. (Leopold, 1949, viii-ix)

The only way forward is to learn to relate to the land – to the earth – as a community to which we belong and to love it and respect.

## **4 Transformation and education**

We have grown accustomed to describe educational objectives in terms of competences: The Council of Europe has defined competences for democratic culture (Council of Europe, 2018); the European Commission has published GreenComp, the European sustainability competence framework (Bianchi et al., 2022); national curricula describe both subject specific competences and transversal competences, and so on. This makes good sense since competences relate both to intellectual capacity, moral standing,

and agency. Moreover, empowerment is about building up or cultivating people's competences. But there is a darker side to this. Looking at the world around us, it is obvious that people are too competent, have too much agency, are too powerful. It is in virtue of our competences that we are ruining the world; by expanding our agency we have become the masters of our environments – we have enslaved nature. Through education and social developments, we have realized our dream of not being subject to the fortunes of nature and become the masters of our own destinies. That is to say, as long as “we” are the affluent people of the north. But the paradox is that this mastery has destined us to the greatest collapse human beings have ever seen. The last verse of the poem by Steinn Steinarr I began with goes something like this:

See, you fall victim to your dream,  
In a complete surrender, defeated man,  
It grabs you with its long and winding arm,  
And eventually, you yourself become its dream.

This dream that humans are about to surrender to has been promoted through education for decades, if not centuries. And for over half a century, it has been well known that it is utterly unsustainable. David Orr describes this failure of our educational systems in the opening of his book *Earth in Mind* when he says:

If one listens carefully, it may even be possible to hear the Creation groan every year in late May when another batch of smart, degree-holding, but ecologically illiterate, Homo sapiens who are eager to succeed are launched into the biosphere. (Orr, 2004, p. 5)

The problem with education is that it has been transformative – but in the wrong way. Education has been about transforming the earth and not the mind and heart. Yet perhaps it is in fact about transforming the heart since little children enjoy simple pleasures, they like to play in nature, like to play together, jump in puddles and admire colourful stones and beautiful flowers. Perhaps our educational systems have been about transforming those little hearts that beat naturally in harmony with nature, into something that beats

to the fast rhythm of the clock, the demands of the labour market, and the call of ever more consumption.

When we talk about transformative education in the context of sustainability education, it is transformation of the heart that is needed. We do not need to be smarter at managing the land, we must instead learn to love it and respect. Rather than seeking green growth it is *we* – the people – who need to grow green. Instead of growing bigger, ever more demanding, ever needier, we need to grow within; we need to cultivate our perceptive capacities, our capacity for empathy, and our capacities for love. This is not a technical task, it is not a matter of absorbing more knowledge, it is nothing AI can do for us. In an interview from 2018, Minouche Shafik, at the time the director of London School of Economics and Political Science but now the president of Columbia University in New York, said: “In the past jobs were about muscles, now they’re about brains, but in future they’ll be about the heart” (Elkann, 2018, April 1). The future that Shafik is talking about is already upon us but is it a future that we are ready for?

Over 200 years ago, Johann Henrich Pestalozzi (1746—1827) emphasised the importance of educating the head, heart and hand, and long before him Aristotle talked about the importance of joining theoretical, practical and moral education. Although these ideas have been with us for millennia, reinterpreted at different times, and even emphasised by people in key positions like Shafik, our present times bear sad witness to hearts not being educated, even on the grounds of Columbia University itself where the policy was called to uproot peaceful protests with brute force (Kelley, April 29, 2024). A century ago, John Dewey who spent most of his academic career as a professor of education at Columbia University, saw democracy as a way of living together grounded in a proper education of the heart:

[To] take as far as possible every conflict which arises – and they are bound to arise – out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree ... with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends. (Dewey, 1998 [1939], p. 342)

Growing green means not only growing our knowledge (the head) and action competence (the hand) but also the heart; seeing others as friends is about growing into stronger and more loving relations with both humans and the non-human part of the world. When I say that we must grow green I am suggesting something specific. We could begin with these two objectives:

More care  
More love

Less mastery  
Less domination

From more care and love, we could move to derivative objectives such as:

More leisure  
More harmony

Less work  
Less exploitation

Fundamental also to growing green are not only the effects on the humans themselves but also on the natural environment:

More nature  
More biodiversity

Less production  
Less destruction

The Nordic societies are societies of abundance, even if the goods are not distributed fairly. In such societies, growing green should be an obvious goal. Who does not want to live a caring life, in harmony with nature and other people, enjoying leisure and access to nature? Who does not want to live in a world which they love, and which nurtures their body and spirit through relationships of mutual respect and care?

My presentation is coming to a close. I have not told you anything new, nor have I talked about anything you didn't already know. My excuse for repeating those simple truths is that if we want to grow green, we must constantly remind ourselves of them. It is a tragic fact about human life that the good we seek, we don't choose, while the bad we are used to, we go on choosing.

## References

- Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U. and Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2022). GreenComp The European sustainability competence framework, Punie, Y. and Bacigalupo, M. editor(s), EUR 30955 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2760/13286>
- Dewey, John. (1998 [1939]). Creative democracy – The task before us. In L.A. Hickman & T.M. Alexander (Eds.) *The essential Dewey*, Vol. I. Indiana University Press.
- Elkann, Alain. (2018, April 1). Minouche Shafik. *Alain Elkann Interviews*. <https://www.alainelkanninterviews.com/minouche-shafik/>
- Global Footprint Network. (n.d.). About Earth Overshoot Day. <https://overshoot.footprintnetwork.org/about-earth-overshoot-day/>
- Jóhannesson, S.E., Davíðsdóttir, B. & Heinonen, J.T. (2018). Standard Ecological Footprint Method for Small, Highly Specialized Economies. *Ecological Economics*, 146, 370-380. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.11.034>.
- Jordan, Karen & Kristjánsson, Kristján. (2017). Sustainability, virtue ethics, and the virtue of harmony with nature. *Environmental Education Research*, 23(9), 1205-1229. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2016.1157681>
- Kelley, Robert D.G.. (April 29, 2024). Letter to Columbia President Minouche Shafik. Boston Review. Retrieved from: <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/letter-to-columbia-university-president-minouche-shafik/>
- Leopold, Aldo. (1949). *A sand county almanac and sketches here and there*. Oxford University Press.
- Niiniluoto, I. M. O., & Wallgren, T. H. (Eds.) (2017). *On the Human Condition: Philosophical Essays in Honour of the Centennial Anniversary of Georg Henrik von Wright*. Acta Philosophica Fennica, 93.
- Nordic Council of Ministers (2019). *A good life in a sustainable Nordic region: Nordic Strategy for Sustainable Development 2013–2025*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/PN2019-705>
- OECD. (n.d.). *Green growth and sustainable development*. <https://www.oecd.org/greengrowth/>

- Orr, David. (2004). *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect*. 10th anniversary edition. Island Press.
- Ravnbøl, Kristoffer & Neergaard, Ida (2019). *Nordic youth as sustainable changemakers: In the transition to sustainable consumption and production*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/NO2019-027>
- Statista. (2024). The 20 countries with the largest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/270180/countries-with-the-largest-gross-domestic-product-gdp-per-capita/>
- Sterling, Stephen (2001). *Sustainable education: Re-visioning learning and change*. Green Books.
- Sterling, Stephen (2014). "At variance with reality": How to re-think our thinking. *Journal of Sustainability Education*, 6, May. Available from [http://www.jsedimensions.org/wordpress/content/at-variance-with-reality-how-to-re-think-our-thinking\\_2014\\_06/](http://www.jsedimensions.org/wordpress/content/at-variance-with-reality-how-to-re-think-our-thinking_2014_06/)
- UNESCO. (1987). *Our common future*. UNESCO.
- von Wright, George Henrik. (1993). *The Tree of Knowledge and Other Essays*. Brill.
- Väyrynen, Kari. (2017). Nemesis Naturea? G.H. von Wright as an environmental thinker. In Niiniluoto, I. M. O., & Wallgren, T. H. (Eds.) (2017). *On the Human Condition: Philosophical Essays in Honour of the Centennial Anniversary of Georg Henrik von Wright*. Acta Philosophica Fennica, 93.