On the Making and Breaking of Frames in Pursuit of Sustainability

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What kind of frame of mind could bring about sustainability?

What is a frame of mind? In ordinary language, I would suggest that we use the term in one of two ways: to refer either to a mood ("She's not in a good frame of mind today"), or to something more enduring, something like a disposition. The term also brings to mind some ideas from philosophical and social-psychological literature that I shall consider later.

Given that the term sustainability is, and always will be, a problematic one (since it clearly does not imply that we shall all live forever), whatever "it" is cannot be brought about by a simple policy fix. Clearly, educators and others must address the ways in which we interact with our environments as sentient and reasoning human beings if, as a species, we are to stand a better chance of thriving, along with other species, on this planet.

Some might object that a frame of mind as a mood, therefore, is just not sufficient. After all, moods come and go, so cannot, by definition, be sustainable themselves. I shall argue that at the most fundamental level, human beings are probably incapable of adopting a radically different frame of mind. Although frames of mind defined as cultural constructs are open to change, they are not much amenable to conscious manipulation. On the other hand, certain experiences can help to induce moods which, though temporary, taken all-in-all can stimulate our love and care for the natural world. This was definitely the case for William Wordsworth, when he wrote in, *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*:

> For oft when on my couch I lie¡br/¿ In vacant or in pensive mood¡br/¿
> They flash upon that inward eye¡br/¿ Which is the bliss of solitude.

Wordsworth is here describing a mood, but one to treasure, and from which he derives (as he makes clear in many other poems) significant personal and ethical guidance. When moods become habitual, as seems certainly to have been the case with Wordsworth, they also tend to become dispositions.

I would argue, then, that education for sustainability should, in part, be concerned with enabling the kinds of experience that promote the kind of mood Wordsworth describes. This is, of course, by no means easy; after all, Wordsworth ascribed his own love of nature to an often solitary rural childhood coupled with a naturally sensitive disposition. I shall return to the challenges for educators in providing appropriate experiences below.

If a frame of mind is more than just a mood, then the term must refer to some more enduring organizational structure for thinking and feeling. Framing, thus understood, has many, vaguely related connotations in various literatures, but all of them seem to relate to categorizations and definitions determined, to some degree, by human agency. Thus, when I think of Frames, I am reminded of the Kantian definition of the Category, of Wittgensteinian "language games," of Erving Goffman's "Frame Analysis," and, more broadly, of genres, disciplines, ways of thinking, even communities of practice; also, of course, of art, photography, and film. Dispositions relate to tendencies to respond in certain ways within these frames, or to utilise certain frames rather than others, depending on the definition used. Regarding educational processes, I am reminded of Bernstein's distinction between Weak and Strong Framing and Classification, and the need for teachers to frame things more strongly for children from certain backgrounds than for others.

Of course, "determined by human agency" does not imply conscious control. Paul Guyer[1] defines Kant's Categories broadly as "those general concepts by means of which our intuitions are converted into representations of objects or judgments." Although our intuitions, thus conceived, relate to an absolute reality, bound by time and space, the Categories function prior to our conscious judgments despite being essentially human constructs (and common to all humanity, according to Kant — though not to all sentient life). What Kant does not give much consideration to is the degree of possible variation in how judgments can be made. Put simply, how much might the same frame of mind allow for different arguments and approaches? A belief in cause and effect, for instance, can be enacted very differently in positivist and post-positivist research paradigms in the social sciences.

Some of this is also true in a sense of the Wittgensteinian language game:[2] truths are constructed from within language games, even though there is no good reason to suppose that the games/frames exist anywhere other than in the

human psyche.

Millennial global politics, as recent events have all too starkly reminded us, bear witness to the huge differences between perspectives and dispositions at the cultural and religious levels. We may all operate within the same Kantian Categories — even the same Wittgensteinian language games — but the world-views we construct can still be radically different. Even within the Christian community (to take a currently relatively uncontroversial example) there are stark differences between liberals who interpret the *Bible* according to cultural context, evangelicals, who interpret the contemporary context according to the *Bible*, and fundamentalists, who use the *Bible* to keep their distance from the modern world as entirely as possible. Looked at this way, language games can certainly be played very differently, and we do not necessarily need a new frame of mind.

Goffman's social-psychological account construes frames as indeed dependent on social and cultural change.[3] He sees frames as something like spectacles, or the selective focusing of a camera lens. To see life through rose-coloured spectacles implies the adoption of particular — in this case, overoptimistic — assumptions about spatial and temporal context. Goffman's frames enable us to read events as appropriate or otherwise within their contexts (and to Goffman, context is all important), thus allowing us, for example, to be unsurprised when a naked person enters the room and sits before us in a life-drawing class, though less composed in the unlikely event that this should happen under other everyday circumstances. (My example, not Goffman's.) Goffman's frames are thus heavily culturally determined. Goffman also differs from Kant, and perhaps from Wittgenstein, in his view of the relative teachability of frames. In his discussion of "breaking frames" through bursting into laughter, Goffman refers to the sense of absurdity that recalcitrant youths often feel when their elders and betters ask them to undertake role plays designed to teach them life skills. A simple example arises from the experience of many of us who have been involved in the upbringing of children: it seems ridiculous to say "please" and "thank you" if you have not been taught to do so habitually. Goffman's frames, therefore, seem less fundamental than Kant's Categories, or Wittgenstein's language games; nevertheless, this does not imply that new frames are created at will. However, Goffman's analysis does seem to leave the educator with some room for manoeuvre, at least with respect to prioritization.

Basil Bernstein[4] has perhaps done most to highlight the pedagogical importance of framing, pointing out that schooling at the end of the twentieth century, at least in Britain and countries like it, tended to reproduce the cultural norms and practices of the socially privileged, with well-meaning liberal teachers misguidedly tending to use weak framing and classification in classrooms, whether or not their students shared their preconceptions about how to "play the game" of schooling. Bernstein's account, taken all in all, is essentially sociological and structural, and more deterministic than Goffman's, with cultural practices di-

vided along social class lines in relation to Codes that embody both work and domestic practices and are expressed via language and schooling. Thus, for a variety of reasons, working-class children tend to grow up in homes where questions are not invited and feelings are little articulated, where lines of authority are rigid and hierarchical, and where rules are hard and fast, and are made explicit (i.e. strongly framed), whereas the children of the professional classes, particularly in the Post-Fordist West, are invited to enter debate and open exploration of feelings, rules, and opinions, so are more at ease in weakly framed situations (such as when a teacher simply tells pupils to "find out about" something). Bernstein's key insight in the context of the present debate is that children experience educational events differently according to their backgrounds and prior experiences — and teachers should take this into account. To misquote Tony Blair on schools in England and Wales, in word if not in spirit: "One size *should not* fit all." This serves as a reminder to environmental educators, for example, that the same experience will not always be interpreted in the same way or produce the same result; the teacher's frames will not always match those of the taught.

Taken together, what do these formulations imply about frames of mind? Perhaps:

(i) they organize, and/or determine and constrain thinking. We see the world from within them, not outside them;

(ii) yet we do have some metacognitive, aesthetic, or deconstructive capacity to recognize frames, if not from the outside, at least from other frames. Also, our frames can be at least shaken by experience (cf. Kant's views on the Sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*). Also, either frames change, or our uses of them or operations within them change;

(iii) what we cannot do is ever fully articulate the relationship of our frames to the material conditions prior to their development. My ways of seeing the world, which cannot be entirely separate from yours (as Wittgenstein argued at some length in the section of *Philosophical Investigations* devoted to the impossibility of a private language), nevertheless retain an essentially arbitrary relationship to biophysical reality, in the sense that we cannot understand the degree to which our cultural options are constrained by material reality any more than we can understand why a dog is called a dog or a *hund* or a *chien*. This is true even of Kant's use of the Category. (An interesting corollary of this is that if intelligent life has developed on other planets, there seems little reason to believe that we should be able to communicate with it, as there is no compelling argument that the same material conditions would produce identical frames

of mind, let alone identical strategic and tactical judgments within them. Even if material reality can be explained mathematically, there is no reason to suppose that mathematical languages would be replicated. Contexts for action never completely replicate.)

I would argue that we tend to see sustainability in terms of the basic Category of cause and effect: modern industrial practices have been the cause; environmental and social degradation are the result; sustainability is the answer. To put it differently, sustainability as a regulative ideal is a product of the dialogue that produced the current sense of environmental and ecological crisis. Given a broad acceptance of this, however, sustainability dialogue is riddled with assumptions that do not really add up. Harré, Brockmeier, and Muhlhausler[5] have shown clearly in *Greenspeak*, for example, how environmentalist rhetoric has cleverly combined palaeontological, cultural, and personal timeframes to create a sense of imminent disaster.

Given these paradoxes, and conflicting views about both frames of mind and sustainability, where might we look to develop new orientations to action, whether or not these amount to frames of mind according to the various definitions above? These possibilities occur:

(i) in the postmodern science advocated by Aran Gare and others,[6] influenced by Jean-Francois Lyotard's rejection of scientific progress as anything more, or less, than a narrative, and not one that can override all others,[7] or

(ii) in some kind of spiritual, deep ecological movement, involving perhaps a revival of Hegelian idealism, thoroughgoing Romanticism, or religious, mystical and quasi-mystical discourses and practices of transcendence and renunciation.

Certain features could be said to be common to each of these, differentiating each from the mainstream of Western modernist thought: a sense of interrelationship; a love of the intangible Other; a delight in the unknown and the unknowable (yet perceivable, under the right circumstances); a belief that the whole is greater than the part will ever apprehend (including the human reason part), so an acceptance of both our power to be at one with nature and the healthy limitation of our powers; and a belief that there may be no ultimate *technological* answer, including no ultimate recipe for sustainability.

I have argued elsewhere that scientific and critical realist readings of the environmental crisis tend to lack one or more of these crucial ingredients.[8] The modernist obsession with control over both nature and society, though it has brought us many benefits, has, for example, tended to blind us to the fact that

many of our most fulfilling experiences are encounters with the non-human, often when we are alone. A few weeks ago, I sat on a stile in a Wiltshire field and watched a fox as it approached me, stopped and looked at me while I looked at it, and we mutually failed to understand each other. A little later, I spent even longer observing gorillas in a zoo. (The very existence of zoos raises questions about environmental learning, of course.) We remember such things, I would suggest, because they disrupt, or make us question, or make us somehow aware of, our frames and remind us that there is always life beyond the narrow limits of our reason: life to which we are related in some way, though we cannot understand it. We are reminded, as Shakespeare wrote, that there is more in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies. Some experiences can rattle our frames.

So a sustainable world may be one that continues to contain more than we can understand. To bring about sustainability, thus defined, we have to leave open the possibilities for surprise and wonder by reminding ourselves that the real riches of living lie in the world beyond that which we control. Life can be perfect (cf. Kant's idea of the Beautiful) and awe-inspiring (the Sublime). Whether we can actually guarantee keeping a balance in what we cannot understand or control is a moot question, though we can certainly try to keep a balance within ourselves.

How can we pursue knowledge in pursuit of the unknowable? Only, I would suggest (and this makes no pretence at an original answer), by acknowledging some force, a mind, greater than our own, individually, collectively, or historically. While scientific modernity, encouraged perhaps by Kant, may tend to see people as moral agents within a mechanical universe, perhaps a healthy reversal is due. We might rather conceive of much of ourselves, much of the time, as mechanical agents within a mysteriously purposeful universe: little technicians who have often lost sight of our significant insignificance in the greater scheme of things that will always, in its entirety, remain closed to us. Thus understood, we are trapped within frames of mind, or patterns of judgment, dictated by a rather reductionist rationalism and impoverished empiricism, but by opening ourselves up to new experience we can reawaken our sense of wonder and of place, if not ever fully know what we're here for, or guarantee our sustainability. The path through the maize field to the stile where I saw the fox is there for all to follow; like all footpaths, it was once the obvious way from A to B. Now there is no point in following it unless you have a dog to walk, or you want to experience that sense of something more or different that comes from following the way less travelled. Both were true in my case. Although it was only a field, and therefore, a pretty strongly humanly controlled environment, it was redolent of the mystery of growth and decay that, presumably, we all wish to sustain; I went there to be reminded of more than I had in my mind, and was not disappointed.

And what of the pedagogical implications? On the one hand, our students need

to understand our ways of doing things as modernist technophiles as much as ever. To function in the modern world requires an education in its ways, and formal education, via schooling, is inevitably largely a conservative process of induction into a culture and its frames. Although frames, as cultural constructs, might change over time, we cannot fully control this process: we cannot simply replace our ways of knowing or our ways of getting to know, either with some new sustainable model, or some pick-and-mix from the more attractive offerings of premodern cultures. The challenge, therefore, becomes to encourage more than what we have been doing, not to pretend to do without it. And where can this added value (for this is real added value) come from? While religious experience has been cited, it is important not to suppose that religious education generally provides this. Often, religious education is received by students as yet another package of facts, and not a very useful one at that. In such cases our teaching is not misguided but is insufficient, not amounting to enough, in many cases, to enrich personal existence through exposing students to their limits and to the mysteries of the world beyond them, even where that may be its espoused intention. However, we are far from incapable of such experience, even in the urban context. Fiction and poetry can do this, as can music and the other arts; contact with animals can do it (particularly, but not solely, in their natural habitats); as can some experiences at the edge of safety and security, including the kind of outdoor pursuit that has become increasingly rare in British schools in an increasingly regulated and litigious climate; sometimes, even science and languages and history in the classroom can do it, perhaps most often for those students rendered susceptible to their mysteries through influences beyond the school. Certain kinds of sense-making are both exploratory and enriching, and resist easy closure.

In conclusion, therefore, education for sustainability as a frame of mind, or towards sustainability as a condition of the planet, might take the view that it remains important to learn languages and sciences and history — but that these should be learnt as much as possible as adventures towards encounters with the unknown, and that students might have some other adventures, too, whether in or out of school, so that, even in education, the experience can exceed the expectations, whether or not the frames are changed (because the latter depends on how we conceive of frames of mind). Let the educational quest always be for the unknowable. How else can coming generations learn to live in awe of life? The twentieth century has been characterised as the century of the attempted extermination of the Other by the exploitation of frighteningly powerful technologies, and we continue to suffer the aftershocks. Alain Finkielkraut,[8] for example, cites both Stalinism and Nazism as the excesses of a coldly instrumental rationality that demonized difference in the pursuit (quite sincere, in their own terms) of Utopia. It would, I fear, be quite possible to demonize difference in pursuit of a sustainable society, based on principles of scientific ecology. Perhaps almost as uncomfortably, Finkielkraut sees the Millennial postmodern condition as also retreating from encounters with the Other, but this time through a failure to respect any ties, ideologies, traditions, or arguments, so that all human living

on Earth is conducted from the superficial perspective of the tourist. Recent events have reminded us just how paper-thin the veneer of mutual tolerance can be. Finkielkraut concludes *In The Name of Humanity* by quoting Hannah Arendt, who considered resentment the natural, and understandable, condition of post-Holocaust humanity, and gratitude as its only feasible alternative. What price an education that makes us grateful for life on Earth?

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Endnotes

1. Guyer 1992, 131.

2. Wittgenstein 1953

3. Goffman 1975

4. Bernstein 1978

5. Harré, Brockmeier and Muhlhauser 1999

6. Gare 1996

7. Lyotard 1984

8. Stables 2001

9. Finkielkraut 2001