MICRO- AND MACRO-SUSTAINABILITY

A COMPARISON OF PHYSICALIST AND NON-PHYSICALIST APPROACHES

This table has emerged, at least in part, as a result of correspondence with Professor Stephen Sterling of Plymouth University, arising from the previous set of comments. I have argued that ‘education for sustainability’ is actually the reverse: *sustainability for education*, that is, the use of sustainability themes and practices to produce well-rounded, fully educated, and strongly-motivated students. While this is entirely admirable, it is quite a different matter from the rapid transformation needed to decarbonise the world in at most two decades, the UK much faster.

My gripe is that all this ‘micro-sustainability’ has captured and eviscerated the starker underlying meanings and implications of the word sustainability, and acts as a smokescreen obscuring the clarity of vision that is now needed. I am now arguing for quite a different, and far more physicalist approach, which for the time being I shall call ‘macro-sustainability’. It won’t happen without someone making a fuss and calling a spade a spade. Here’s me throwing down the gauntlet.

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|  | MICRO-SUSTAINABILITY | MACRO-SUSTAINABILITY |
|  | NON-PHYSICALIST | PHYSICALIST |
| Tends to attract | Social scientists, educators, humanities teachers | Physical scientists |
| Time horizon | Long: 100+ years | Short: 20-50 years |
| Ethical perspective | Humanistic values maintained; aversion to ranking | Emphasis on sequencing of action, ranking of processes and activities; ‘temporal Rawlsianism’ |
| Style | Holistic, wide/soft focus, both-and | Quantitative, logical, either-or |
| Logical frame | Using sustainability patterns to educate students | Using educational techniques to communicate  sustainability patterns |
| Aim | To produce better citizens with humanistic sustainability values and skills | To produce critically informed graduates and professional fuss-makers |
| Attitude to ‘triple bottom line’ framework | The factors are co-equal: ‘Trinitarian’ | Physical factors primary: ‘Unitarian’ |
| Operating space for humanity | Raworth doughnut | Rockström radar |
| Mode | Bottom-up, ‘leading by example’ | Top-down, ‘democratic dirigisme’ |
| Focus | Political/economic/social response to physical challenges | Physical response to physical challenges; social and economic factors considered secondary |
| Status | Orthodoxy, embracing a widely-understood meaning of ‘sustainability’ | Minority: Conception of sustainability too literal for widespread acceptance |
| Structural basis | Highly theorised;  academic ‘cult of complexity’? | Based on simple,  basic ‘Piagetian’ concepts |
| Locus | More common in new universities | Uncommon |