


# Transformational ethics to bridge the void between facts and truths



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The Special Focus in this issue contributes to the emerging debate and critical reflection of morals and values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It reflects the broader mission of academia to bridge the gap between the epistemological and the ontological domains that our late modern society faces. Having widely emerged out of the Enlightenment, today this gap translates into a tension between facts and truths favoring conflictual situations.

Academia carries the responsibility to address the ambiguity arising from how we perceive and approximate facts, how we act based on these facts, and what can be considered justified truth. While it is easy to keep ethics lofty and high in the clouds, ultimately it is the understanding of how our actions are guided by our morals and their impact on the ground that makes ethics tangible and transformational.

Sustainability science operates between these diverse forms of knowledge, as it is deeply rooted in systems science, widely builds on normative knowledge, and has a transformative agenda at its heart. For this, we need to reflect on our scientific conduct, engage with how we educate future scientists, and evaluate how we collaborate to empower societies of which we are an active and interactive part.

With the societal and technological challenges that we face today, we recognize a normative void that often leaves unclear how we ought to act based on reality as we perceive it, and how we ought to act in a moral sense. Continuously embracing a humble critical reflection of ourselves, “we can partly understand not only what is in fact true, but also what ought to be true, and what we might be able to make true”<sup>1</sup>.

Embracing the normative void between our approximation of facts and our responsibility to act morally inclusive requires diverse perspectives, some of which you will find in this *GAIA* issue. After all, science is facing increasing challenges in how it interacts with society and contributes to transformation; while our empirical facts are often deeply subjective there might be shared ontologies in the deeper strata of knowledge that we still try to unravel. When it comes to sustainability, this tension is amplified even more and forms the void between the epistemological and the ontological, most prominently but not exclusively because of the knowledge-action gap.

Time will tell how we navigate the complicated path that facts and truths have taken to date. Yet academia needs to live up to the responsibility of transforming the world how it is into a world how it ought to be – towards a future that provides capabilities for everyone while interconnecting individuals by a shared and universal agreement that makes everyone’s life go best.

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<sup>1</sup> Parfit, D. 2011. *On what matters*.  
Volume 2. Oxford, UK: Oxford  
University Press. p. 620.