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If we postulate a need for the transformation of society towards sustainable development, we also need to transform science and overcome the fact/value split that makes it impossible for science to be accountable to society. The orientation of this paradigm transformation in science has been under debate for four decades, generating important theoretical concepts, but they have had limited impact until now. This is due to a contradictory normative science policy framing that science has difficulties dealing with, not least of all because the dominant framing creates a lock-in. We postulate that in addition to introducing transdisciplinarity, science needs to strive for integration of the normative aspect of sustainable development at the meta-level. This requires a strategically managed niche within which scholars and practitioners from many different disciplines can engage in a long-term common learning process, in order to become a “thought collective” (Fleck) capable of initiating the paradigm transformation. Arguing with Piaget that “decentration” is essential to achieve normative orientation and coherence in a learning collective, we introduce a learning approach—Cohn's “Theme-Centred Interaction”—which provides a methodology for explicitly working with the objectivity and subjectivity of statements and positions in a “real-world” context, and for consciously integrating concerns of individuals in their interdependence with the world. This should enable a thought collective to address the epistemological and ethical barriers to science for sustainable development.

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