Natural and Spiritual Capitals and their Interaction

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Spiritual value as an ecosystem service

This is the Scottish island of Arran, where I have been taking students each year on a ‘nature and spirit’ field trip. Imagine my delight at reading the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment¹ and discovering its frequent mention of the spiritual in its classification of ecosystem services. A word search detected it 348 times. The enthusiasm for ‘ecosystem services’ as a metaphor is matched by that for ‘natural capital’. There is a parallel increase in speaking of spiritual capital, but their combined use is very rare². In this talk I am walking on thin ice, therefore, rather than along well-trodden paths.

The economic metaphors of services and capital have been embraced by some in the environmental movement with, I judge, an air of desperation. ‘How can we get the people who count to take our arguments seriously?’ Answer: ‘We must start counting ourselves.’ The aim is to speak to big business and to finance ministries in their own language. There are some successes here, but also worries. Is it economics or accounting that drives decisions; total welfare or the bottom line? And how well does the economic metaphor of capital really map onto real-world nature, or does it deform our ideas of nature in potentially damaging ways?

‘Spiritual’ in the literature

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment conceived the spiritual aspect of ecosystems in two main ways.

We recognise the spiritual relationship of indigenous peoples with sacred places and species and the use they may make of natural products in religious practices. There may be special sites such as Devil’s Tower, in North America. Animals such as the cow in India may be held sacred. And nature may be harvested for feathers in headdresses or for gifts for the gods.

The American transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, stayed at Walden Pond in 1845 in the search for an authentic life close to nature. Many who write about ecosystem services belong to a culture wary of formal religion but which embraces the spiritual experiences obtained when walking or working in the wild. This recharging of batteries, as we might say in Britain, is a spiritual benefit ecosystems provide.

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment of 2011 attempted to compute this benefit, even to put a price on it using travel-cost methods to estimate the revealed preference value of going on retreat in rural monasteries or, by hedonic pricing, to estimate the uplift on house prices near village churches. It would be ridiculous to calculate the replacement cost of picked flowers to decorate churches.

Developments in the NEA Follow-On

In the Follow-On³ to the National Ecosystem Assessment, published this year, I and others in our team attempted to characterise the diversity of contexts in which spiritual aspects of nature are valued. I pick on just three.
Growing up in the Sussex countryside, one of my favourite events of the year was Rogation Sunday. We did not ‘beat the bounds’ in my parish, but we did go for a pilgrimage around key places in the village praying for good harvests. Later, as a country rector, the popularity of harvest festival, nature hymns such as “All things bright and beautiful”, and tending graves was obvious. Certainly a veneer of Christianity, but evidence also of paganism.

The British equivalent to American transcendentalism is Romanticism, with its emphasis on the spiritual over the religious. Wordsworth, observing daffodils beside Ullswater, has taught generations of us to connect with Nature, partly as an antidote to urban, industrial life. This is evidenced in charities that wish to protect an ideal countryside, and the model of walking through nature.

A scientific approach to nature may seem paradoxical if described as spiritual. The Early Modern biologists, such as John Ray, were motivated in their science by their theological belief that God had written both the bible and nature, revelation was in both. Darwin may be construed as banishing God from this project, but the attempt to discover meaning and purpose through scientific study of natural history remains alive and well. Our major atheist theologians, if I may call them that, look to biology to establish their secularist belief about the world.

“Ask not what nature can do for you, but what you can do for nature.”
All three of these strands appreciate what nature provides by way of spiritual benefits. They also recognise human duties to nature, of both respect and care. The spiritual benefits just might fit within the economic concept of preference satisfaction; our duties to nature cannot.

More than that, nature’s most profound ‘ecosystem service’ may be to put us humans in our place. It reminds us that we are a dispensable outcome of nature, more than ever nature is a sub-set of the human economic project. Nature, forever beyond human control, has the last word, long after the last human has died on Earth.

What does nature need to be like to perform these spiritual services?
What natural capital is needed to perform these spiritual services?

For science, we need biodiversity and ecosystems functioning with as little human interference as possible. That way we may analyse natural processes. This was the explicit motivation behind the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. National Nature Reserves were for studying nature and the Sites of Special Scientific Interest were for science. Experiments in natural regeneration in the Caledonian Forest are an example.

Romantics desire a diversity of untamed landscapes with little evidence of industry or modern agricultural. Evidence of our early ancestors, contrariwise, is welcome (this stone circle is on Arran). We may try to follow their footprints in search of an unmediated relationship to nature, though that would be to forget that humans always engage with the world around them through cultures of one sort or another.

And for Locals, for those still connected to the Christian and pagan culture of their past, as well as for those who have lost that connection in the modern world, it is a nature on everyone’s doorstep that is needed. Plants and animals, gardens and pets, and the opportunity to grow food; and burial grounds in every community.
Yet, the more important question may be, “What does our spiritual capital need to be like to appreciate our duty to nature?”

**Spiritual capital as metaphor**
The metaphor of spiritual capital has developed out of the metaphors of social and human capital. In development economics it has gradually been realised that to get economic growth you need functioning institutions, but these in turn need underlying shared values such as trust (for markets) and a belief in innovation (for entrepreneurialism). Claims are made that these are correlated with the religious beliefs of a culture. Protestant Christianity is endorsed as laying these foundations for American capitalism, for instance, and this not merely in Tawney’s ninety years ago, but in current authors.

Alternatively, others argue that human societies need a shared understanding of meaning and purpose, a spiritual understanding, if they are to function well. One reading of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is that he presumes, as the context of the market he famously extols, a widespread attachment to the virtues. He sees an important role for religion in supporting this. Here markets are accountable to morality; high spiritual and moral capital promote justice in the structures and operation of markets.

This provides an explanation for complexities observed in markets. Some customers, at a cost to themselves, adhere to ethical principles in their purchases. Companies may attempt to construct brand images for their products that emphasise their moral credentials. There is a widespread acceptance that some environmental regulation is necessary that will restrict what products can be brought to market.

**Applicability of the capital metaphor to both spiritual and natural capital**
Lakoff and Johnson explained how much of our thinking depends on metaphors, but also how we need to be alert to their unwarranted effects, where metaphors are unduly stretched. This ‘capital’ metaphor has weaknesses. For instance, spiritual capital cannot be possessed or traded, and much possessable natural capital is held in common. Spiritual capital is not fungible, and neither is ‘critical natural capital’. It is hard to imagine how one might bring spiritual capital into financial accounting.

However, there are some fruitful lines of application. Just as investment enables production by factories, so social investment in spiritual capital enables a society to achieve more. And investment in spiritual capital enables risk-taking and a positive view of the future. Yet this spiritual attitude to the future is the antithesis of discounting and depreciation. We need to keep alert to misleading extrapolations of these metaphors.

**God, the ultimate valuer?**
At the end of the day it is not the stock market that pronounces judgement on success and failure. From the earliest times, those who wished to operate dishonestly disbelieved in the gods, thereby hoping there would be no final giving of an account. In the rich parts of the world these days it is fashionable to doubt god’s existence. Yet even without a god, many have a sense that nature is full of intrinsic value. This mysterious and contested value is more easily conceived as the value nature has to the One who creates her and all who inhabit her. This is one way to answer Dario Kenner’s question, “Who should value nature?” For certain, it cannot just be those with financial clout.

It is not a question of “What do I like?”, but of “Where do I detect true value lies?” For this question we need those aspects of social and spiritual capital that provide the ‘capacity’ (a better metaphor
than ‘capital’) to notice value in nature. At the individual human level this will include spiritual practices, the exercise of care and the cultivation of virtue. As a society we need to nurture individual spirituality and recognise that generosity is needed alongside self-interest if the hidden hand is to work. Those closest to nature, often the economically poor but spiritually rich, can teach us most about how precious she is.

**Secularisation and spiritual capital**

Of course, in Britain and much of the West, religion is declining. Meanwhile, one reading of the rise in Islam around the world is as a repudiation of Western, capitalist values. A small percentage, perhaps 5% in Britain, avers “I'm spiritual, not religious”. This is often particularly associated with concern for nature. Yet, neither is New Atheism necessarily ‘un-spiritual’ in its concern for sustainability. Richard Dawkins argues that we have the capacity to override our selfish genes with higher values.

**Spirituality behind the shift we need**

So if there is reduction in spiritual capital, it has less to do with the decline in religion than with the rise in oft-lamented trends: Consumerism and retail therapy; Virtual living and a disconnect from people and nature; Sex, drugs and drink. These may be anaesthetics against alienation, inequality and a televised global world. However, the feeding of this addiction comes at the cost of the exploitation of people, nature and the future.

If we are to preserve and enhance natural capital we shall have to reduce consumption and reverse “GDP Growth”. For this to be acceptable to populations, we need a shift to a new set of values, values such as sufficiency, quality and fairness. There will need to be an emphasis on non-consumptive goods, ones that affirm human relationships and contact with nature.

**Strengthening spiritual capital**

This shift will rely on spiritual capital, which will need to be of sufficient capacity and quality for society to change direction. Religious institutions have a role, but a declining one. Businesses can make significant investments in spiritual capital. They can talk up and really value spiritual capacities, such as trust, generosity and concern for the long-term, among their staff, customers and suppliers. The way in which they advertise their products can strengthen the spiritual dimension of the market. Product development and brand values can reinforce wider moral values. Companies can encourage the raising of regulatory standards.

For society as a whole we can raise our ethical expectations and norms. We can educate the virtues, especially when outcomes are uncertain, throwing calculations of future benefits into disarray. We can discover within and among us a spirit of sacrifice. We can widen the boundaries of our collective concern to encompass disenfranchised people, nature, and all who are yet to come. We can act in faith, hope and love.

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