

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## The nature of relationships

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Monday, August 8th, 2022

‘Entangled Life’ by Merlin Sheldrake is a fascinating [look](#) into the role that fungi play in making the natural world what it is. From the impact on humans to the symbiotic relationship between mycorrhizal fungi and trees. The relationship between humans, plants and fungi is also the focus of the Wellcome Collection’s current [exhibition](#) ‘Rooted Beings’, where a number of installations “*explore the theme of symbiosis and what can be learnt from plant behaviour and our complex interdependence with the vegetal world*”.

Symbiosis was a word first coined in the late nineteenth century to describe the relationship between different biological organisms. It is often used in the context of a mutually beneficial relationship. At the other end of the spectrum is a parasitic relationship where one species benefits to the detriment of another. In between there are a variety of possibilities, which are either completely neutral or where one benefits with no harm to the other.

The study of symbiotic relationships gives rise to questions about the degree to which nature is fundamentally competitive or collaborative. At times this has spread into political debate, with more market based systems favouring a competitive narrative while more socialist approaches favour a more collaborative perspective.

As with most binary debates the situation appears to be rather more nuanced. Sheldrake points out that “*plants and mycorrhizal fungi are no longer thought to be behaving either mutualistically or parasitically...Nutrients can move through the soil via fungal connections, but so can poisons. The narrative possibilities are richer. We have to shift perspectives and find comfort in – or just endure – uncertainty.*” Something that mediators are trying to help their clients grapple with all the time!

Looking at human systems we can observe a fine balance between competition and collaboration. For example, companies within an industry will compete vigorously for customers, yet might collaborate to promote the interests of the industry as a whole. Competition can be a spur to innovation, yet collaboration can help promote scientific research, which might have wider spin-offs. Collaboration can be a powerful force for good, yet too much collaboration of the wrong sort might lead to cartels which exploit customers.

Governance arrangements and institutions have a key role to play in finding the right balance between competition and collaboration and in developing sustainable systems. In their [book](#) ‘Why Nations Fail’ economist Daron Acemoglu and political scientist James Robinson analyse differences in development between countries. They highlight the critical role that institutions can

play in ensuring the development of ‘inclusive’ as opposed to ‘extractive’ systems.

The more pluralistic and democratic institutions are, the more successful and sustainable development is likely to be. An inclusive institutional framework enables the development of trust and builds a sense of fairness and solidarity. This has positive economic spin offs via a greater willingness to take risks, invest and be innovative.

Financial innovation alongside technical and scientific advances has played a critical role in helping facilitate economic growth. Yet its relationship to overall human progress has been complex. Many aspects have been positive; such as providing investment to support innovation and boost productivity, along with the development of company structures to raise capital and widen ownership, insurance to spread risk, savings vehicles to provide pensions etc. Yet without the right institutions and governance to mediate the relationship between finance and wider society, much of what takes place within the financial world can become much less benign.

Thomas Levenson’s [book](#) ‘Money for Nothing’ tells the story of the South Sea Company in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was an early example of financial engineering (by those with dubious motives) as modern capitalism was beginning to get into its stride. It resulted in a speculative bubble, as people rushed to buy a shares in the company that was taking on Great Britain’s national debt and whose potential was oversold. As the share price rose more people piled in, in fear of missing out, driving the price even higher until the bubble burst. It wasn’t the first time and it won’t be the last that the maxim ‘if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is’, held true.

Much of what happens in the world of finance, particularly speculation in derivatives loosely connected to what goes on in the real world by those pursuing ‘money for nothing’, could be considered ‘socially useless’. A description [used](#) by a former chairman of the Financial Services Authority when discussing the growth of the financial services industry in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

As the speculative aspect of the finance sector grows not only does it divert investment from more productive activities, it also tends to attracts some of the brightest minds in search of bigger rewards than they might find elsewhere, thus imposing significant opportunity costs. Given the way financial crises resulting from speculative excess can blow back into the real world, particularly when the costs of clearing up the debris fall on those that can least afford them, one might even call elements of financial ‘services’ socially dangerous – parasitic even. Generally speaking much less attention is given to the external social costs of pursuing financial gains while significant private benefits are being reaped.

A wider related question concerns mankind’s relationship with nature as a whole. Where does it sit on the symbiosis spectrum? JR McNeill’s [book](#) ‘The Great Acceleration’ charts the impact of the dramatic developments in humanity’s relationship with the biosphere over the last eighty years, as we have entered what has been termed the Anthropocene. It suggests the relationship is more towards the parasitic end of the spectrum.

Our preferred approach so far could be characterized as combination of the extraction of non-renewable raw materials alongside the dumping of unwanted waste into the air, land and sea. At the moment it appears like there is little prospect of a significant improvement as the pursuit of growth widens and deepens. In his [book](#) ‘How the World Really Works’ Vaclav Siml offers a sobering assessment of our situation. “*We are a fossil-fuelled civilisation whose technical and*

*scientific advances, quality of life, and prosperity rest on the combustion of huge quantities of fossil carbon, we cannot simply walk away from this critical determinant in our fortunes in a few decades, never mind years.”*

A fundamental reset of our relationship with nature, to make it less ‘extract and dump’, would appear to be vital if we are not to do further irreparable damage to the host we rely upon, which will rebound upon all of us, particularly the most vulnerable. This was certainly the conclusion of a recent [UN report](#) on the value of nature for wellbeing. As Sir Patrick Vallance, the UK’s Government’s Chief Scientific Advisor [puts](#) it: “*Nature is a finite resource, and human self-interest alone should determine that biodiversity must be protected*”.

Any such reset will require an honest assessment of where we find ourselves and a deep understanding of what’s required, individually, collectively and systemically, to have any chance of securing a sustainable future. This is where a mediative approach can play a vital role. Institutions and individuals that can help deepen understanding and generate realistic options to balance widely varied short and longer term interests are essential if we are to ensure that relationships between different groups in society, between countries, between generations and between humankind and nature as a whole is less zero or negative sum and more positively symbiotic. Perhaps we have a lot to learn from what appear at first sight to be the most basic organisms.

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