



laetus in praesens

Alternative view of segmented documents via Kairos

21st December 2006 | Draft

Governance and Spin in the Knowledge Universe

Implications for governance, sustainability and alternatives

-- / --

Annex 3 of *Towards an Astrophysics of the Knowledge Universe: from astronautics to noonautics?* (2007)

Introduction

The following sections are adapted from an earlier paper (*Psychology of Sustainability: embodying cyclic environmental processes*, 2002) to clarify the role of spin in a knowledge universe.

Sustainability and spin

In the past decade "spin" has become recognized as the distinguishing feature of contemporary politics and governance and of how business is done by those of any competence (supported by "creative accounting"). The mediatisation of politics and commerce has encouraged the competitive use of spin to ensure that a positive light is cast upon any proposed initiative to minimize recognition of its negative consequences. In fact, presentations in support of new projects essentially require that a "positive spin" be placed upon a proposal in comparison with "negative spins" that may be deliberately or inadvertently associated with competing proposals. When initiatives subsequently fail in any way, suggesting incompetence on the part of those who undertook them, then damage limitation again calls extensively upon such spin techniques -- again possibly through placing some form of "negative spin" on those making such suggestions.

In this sense it might be said that the perception of sustainability is intimately related to spin -- whether in accusations of unsustainability or in claims in favour of it. In both cases, claims have been made in such a way as to be deliberately misleading in order to make political points. It is of course correct that buried beneath such spun facts are those which validate arguments. The challenge of modern society is that adequate resources can always be deployed to conceal or devalue such facts through spin. Ultimately it is only situations such as when houses are flooded that might be said to escape the use of presentational spin -- although even then it is immediately deployed to cast blame elsewhere.

Given the preponderance of spin, it may be useful to explore the extent to which all sustainable collective initiatives are necessarily characterized by spin. In this sense spin ensures forms of stability and coherence that are prime characteristics of sustainability. This recalls the use of "spin" as a property of fundamental particles or of planetary rotation. In the case of particles, it is defined in the terms such as the following:

Spin is the name for the angular momentum carried by a particle. For composite particles, the spin is made up from the combination of the spins of the constituents plus the angular momentum of their motion around one-another. For fundamental particles spin is an intrinsic and inherently quantum property, it cannot be understood in terms of motions internal to the object. The intrinsic spin must be included in applications of conservation of angular momentum. Spin is given in units of \hbar , which is the quantum unit of angular momentum, typically giving rise to spins of 0, $1/2$, 1, $3/2$.

In the case of astronomy, two forms of "spin" are distinguished:

- Orbital revolution, ranging from 1 year in the case of the Earth to 230 million years for the Sun around the galaxy, associated with the notion of orbital stability
- Axial rotation (confusingly described in mechanics by rpm), ranging from 24 hours in the case of Earth, through 0.5-10 days for young stars, to some 10^8 years in the case of the galaxy, with pulsars having a rotation period of 0.001 to 10 seconds; axial rotation contributes significantly to planetary stability, notably in compensating for the gravitational forces associated with orbiting a powerful attractor

The concerns of particle physics and astronomy for spin are linked in the focus of mathematics and physics on "spinors". Spinors have played a crucial role in both throughout the past. Spinors are used extensively in physics, but they may offer a means of understanding

relationships between social groups identifying with alternative realities. It is widely accepted that they are more fundamental than tensors (of which they are the "square root"), and the easy way to see this is through the results obtained in general relativity theory by using spinors -- results that could not have been obtained by using tensor methods only [more]. The foundation of the concept of spinors is groups; spinors appear as representations of groups. Spinors and groups are both widely used in the theory of elementary particles :

Discovered in 1913 by Cartan in his investigations of the representation theory of the orthogonal groups, spinors first appeared in physics in the 1920's in the guise of Pauli's spin matrices and in Dirac's relativistic theory of electron spin. Since that time, spinors, spin structures and their attendant Dirac operators have remained of fundamental importance in quantum physics and in many areas of mathematics, especially those dealing with the relation between geometry, topology and analysis. In mathematics they provide key insights into many questions, including index theorems for elliptic operators, the integrality of characteristic numbers, existence of metrics of positive scalar curvature, twistor spaces, and (most recently) Seiberg-Witten theory. [more]

There may well be a case for exploring insights into the pattern of distinctions between fundamental particles as a source of clues to why conceptual models (and their social manifestations) are "charged" positively or negatively with respect to their perceptions of each other - - and so determining their interactions. Might it be possible that there are parallels deriving from constraints on human thinking (cf Lakoff and Núñez, 2000, on the cognitive science of mathematics) with properties of quarks such as strangeness, charm, topness, bottomness, and flavour [more] ?

It is curious that the degree of complexity and sophistication considered necessary and admissible to handle the phenomena of astronomy and fundamental particles is several orders greater than that considered appropriate to the challenge of sustainable development and its governance. And yet in the case of fundamental physics its results are sufficiently concrete to produce nuclear weapons and power stations. But in the case of the far less sophisticated models considered adequate for sustainable development and conflict resolution, the results have proven more than inadequate to a challenge of ever-increasing magnitude. In the case of physics success is of course achieved by extreme reduction in the focus to conditions under which all parameters can be effectively controlled. Sustainable development, on the other hand, has to deal with open systems -- which would surely argue for conceptual models of greater complexity than are required for the "simpler" systems of nuclear physics. Perhaps those concerned with sustainable development could learn from the multidimensional tools with which physics is obliged to work -- rather than assuming that the tasks can be handled with the tools with which they feel comfortable.

What is humanity trying to achieve through global frameworks, programmes, and strategic initiatives?

Spinning an alternative

It is curious that the industrial civilization that is such a challenge to sustainable development was initiated by an industrial "revolution" -- and long-heralded by the invention of the "wheel". It is equally curious that radical socio-political transformations have long been described as "revolutions" -- just as advances in knowledge are described as conceptual "revolutions". What is it that "revolves" and with respect to what? How might this help to understand a sustainable development "revolution" -- or has "sustainable" been implicitly defined in that context as having no "revolutionary" characteristics? Is any alternative to unsustainable development possible without some form of spin?

Space colonies are seen by some as an alternative to the challenges of an over-crowded planet -- although with remarkably little effort to determine how to overcome the psychosocial dynamics that have created the problems on Earth. It is curious that astronautics has made it clear that construction of habitable space colonies will in all probability require that they be "spun" to create a sense of gravity to make them viable for humans. In physical terms it becomes clear that such spin is required with respect to the surrounding environment. Access to such environments will then typically be via the axis of spin -- although, ironically again, the docking manoeuvres and terminology recall the challenges of consummating a courtship relationship.

In psychosocial terms in interpersonal relationships, "spinning" also has a long history. This starts with the process of "spinning a tale" to young children. It is however a characteristic of the role of any good storyteller. The process draws the listener into the framework of an alternative reality -- to make it "real". The importance of this process in modern finance is described with the phrase "talking up" -- typically used to boost confidence in a failing currency or corporation, to make "real" a condition which may otherwise appear contrary to the facts available to those who are otherwise informed. The problems of spinning by corporations have been strongly highlighted during 2002 through the use of "creative accounting" -- and the dramatic loss of confidence in the financial reporting of even the most reputable companies and the failure to sustain share prices in the stock market. Sustaining confidence is fundamental to the capitalist system -- and to any sustainable reality.

The notion of "spinning a line" to present an alternative reality was perhaps at the origin of the term "spin". Corporations in particular have used it to keep out of trouble. Consultants are now arguing that it does not work in the long term. For example, Reputation Quest specialises in risk communication, teaching organizations how to be pro-active in managing issues in order to deliver a "sustainable reputation".

Spinning a line is also described in terms such as "doing a number" on someone to entrap them in an alternative framework, possibly as part of a courtship process governed by the criteria that "all is fair in love and war". It is most often used by commercial representatives in the selling process. Various forms of entrapment may be considered [more].

The process by which coalitions emerge, through an increasing degree of self-reference and self-citation, can be understood as a form of spinning -- associated with the process of "talking it up" and "psyching up" the participants. As with space colonies, individuals and groups may also be understood to be "spinning a habitat" for themselves -- the psychosocial form of "cocooning". It is a way to

protect oneself sustainably from the harsh, unpredictable realities of the outside world [more]. Gated communities can be considered as armoured cocoons -- currently providing a form of psychological sustainability for 4 million Americans. The nomenclatura constituted by the Communist elite was effectively a form of politico-administrative gated community offering immense economic privileges -- now echoed to a considerable degree by the eurocracy of the European Union [more; game]. Psychosocial cocooning is considered most problematic in the case of certain forms of sect.

The concept of cocooning points to other lessons from its metaphorical roots -- the cocoons spun by silkworms, other insects and spiders. The features juxtaposed to create a psychosocial cocoon, and the resultant web of mnemonic associations, recall the mnemo-technical role of structures such as "memory theatres" (see Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*). Such devices compensate for attention-deficiency disorders, erosion of collective memory [Judge, 1980] and the inability to comprehend the longer-term cycles fundamental to sustainability. The traditional mnemonic role of beaded circlets in this respect merits wider recognition with respect to the challenges of sustainability [Judge, 2000].

Language itself may be understood as an intimate (deep structural) equivalent to such mnemo-technical structures -- a web by which an alternative reality can be sustained [more]. In this light it would be interesting to compare natural languages in terms of their capacity to sustain sustainability. Given the more than 290 artificial (non-computer) languages identified on the web [more], it might even be possible to craft such a language to have significant advantages in this respect -- as a secular "wholly" language for reasons analogous to the need for "holy" languages [more]. Alternatively much might be accomplished by envisaging its characteristics, notably in contrast to one impregnated with military metaphors. Given the call for a compensating feminine influence, it would be intriguing to discover whether explicit use of gender, as in languages such as French, remedied to any degree the tendencies to pseudo-neutrality evident in policy English -- criticized by ecofeminists as "manstream" and based on problematic assumptions relating to environmental ethics and the dialogue between ecofeminism and deep ecology (see Greta Gaard, *Ecofeminism*. 1993) [more].

Alternative realities can perhaps be usefully understood as "strange attractors" engendered by particular sets or structurings of human values [Judge, 1993]. Such attractors give rise to spin-type psychosocial activity in their neighbourhoods --- as with moths around a candle flame. The future may see interesting explorations of the relationship between attractors and spinors in the light of the multidimensional spaces explored in astronomy [more; more]. A form of spin or hype may be used to "talk up" realities that do not exist - - or which might exist with a different way of seeing. Ambitious conferences of modest success, focusing on vital issues relating to alternative psychosocial realities, can be transformed in this way to provide role models for the future [cf experiments with [psycocommunities](#), [transdisciplinarity](#), and [culture](#)]. How could this be most creatively done for the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002)?

Reality, relativity and relativism

If alternative realities have to be adequately "spun" to acquire integrity as attractors, how are "local" and "regional" alternatives to be reconciled with "global" frameworks? Put differently, how is adequate spin to be given to "local" initiatives to act as an attractor for local people and to give them an attractive identity distinct from any "global" framework?

In a highly turbulent evolving knowledge society, who would want a single dominant view to constrain the multiplicity of extant perspectives? Is tolerance of the apparent confusion of multiple realities to be rejected as unrealistic relativism? Such questions become increasingly pertinent in a web environment in which millions of sites advocate particular perspectives to users -- perspectives that may well be totally incompatible with those advocated on other sites. The number of sites is predicted to increase exponentially over the coming years. Each site, like a flower, is endeavouring to entice visitors as a means of reproducing its memetic structure. Aside from attention deficiency disorders, how is anyone to gain more than a "local" understanding of this universe of knowledge?

Not only is there a proliferation in contrasting perspectives, there is also a proliferation in quantity on a particular topic -- to the point of being the focus of whole libraries and information systems. As one concrete example, of a specialized sector, consider the number of sites concerned with "global governance", or the number of reports on the matter for consideration in relation to the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002). Who will choose to read such documents attentively and how will their insights be processed together as an exemplification of the conceptual and policy challenges of the governance of sustainable development? What insights submitted will be deliberately or inadvertently marginalized by this process and what insights will not be fed into that context because of the predictably problematic nature of the process? How will the insights at that event be related to those at preceding and following events on global governance? How will any coherent sense of a desirable alternative reality emerge from such a global process? How will it acquire local significance -- especially if local significance is not adequately reflected in global frameworks?

How will the spin given to the final declarations and outcomes of conferences on global governance and sustainable development relate to the reality of the alternatives advocated? What has been learnt over the past decade, if not since the [UN Conference on the Human Environment](#) (Stockholm, 1972), with respect to the credibility given to alternatives, as opposed to "business as usual"?

Astronomy suggests a way of thinking about a society with a multiplicity of alternative frameworks -- and shows how communication between them might be understood. Perhaps the most significant feature of space in an astronomical sense, as with space at the atomic level, is the infrequency of "matter". The emptiness of space is its prime feature. This way well be the case for socio-cognitive knowledge space -- within which there may be very little that "matters". Zones of alternative reality may be tiny exceptional anomalies in that vast space -- widely separated, however locally they may be clustered. This would notably clarify the years of experience required to transit from one distant reality framework to another.

Within the immensity of this space, an alternative reality may emerge as a "distortion" of the more general framework. The principles which structure this reality and constitute its framework must necessarily be spun in relation to the surrounding emptiness and nearby alternatives -- in order to develop a distinct identity through a form of gyroscopic stability. Such spin responds to the challenge of

ensuring that one alternative can be sustained independently in relation to another. This spin creates a form of gravity -- and gives seriousness and *gravitas* to that alternative for those associated with it. This combination of spin and gravity then overrides the tendency to be drawn inexorably towards larger attractors at greater distance. As a reference framework, it may also give them a real sense that the cosmos revolves around them -- that their framework is at the centre of the universe.

The astronomical metaphor facilitates understanding of the dynamics of the co-existence of different forms of truth within the vastness of communication space. At the simplest metaphoric level, it may be declared that "the sun rises" -- from a particular location in what amounts to a "planetary" reality framework. Such a declaration has a totally different significance at another point on that planet (at the same time), or from another planetary framework within the same "solar system". Its significance is different again from another stellar framework elsewhere in the local galaxy, or from another galaxy. The galactic truths may appear more universal than those of the planet -- and yet still "the sun rises" however irrelevant this may be claimed to be from elsewhere. The astronomical metaphor articulates the complex relationship between a multiplicity of frameworks as a counter to accusations of simplistic relativism. These tend to undermine efforts to comprehend how multiple truths can co-exist in practice. The sun may indeed not rise for you -- when it is rising for me, if you are elsewhere.

Such a metaphor indicates how different kinds and levels of truth can co-exist sustainably. The universal truths may indeed be all-encompassing, but the cycles with which they are associated may be far beyond the ken of those who identify with "planetary" and "local" truths with shorter cycles. Such local truths may be understood as conceptual cocoons through which local habits sustain local identities.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

For further updates on this site, [subscribe here](#)