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Reflections on ‘true’ business sustainability

Challenging definitions, recognizing couplings, developing intelligence

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Abstract

The concept of business sustainability has been investigated, reviewed, and criticized by a plethora of scholars. What constitutes the essence of business sustainability – and its relationship to the actual state of our planet – is still an integral part of the discourse on business-society relations. Recently, Dyllick & Muff (2016) have reviewed literature in order to uncover what constitutes 'true' business sustainability, explaining the apparent absence of a coupling between corporate sustainability initiatives and the state of the planet and explore how this coupling can be strengthened. As such, the authors provide many relevant pointers for answering the question: when is business truly sustainable?

This paper aims to respond both critically and constructively to Dyllick & Muff's article by addressing three points: the somewhat confusing conception of what actually comprises 'true' business sustainability, the authors' choice not to address the underlying economic model and the model of consumer behavior, and the types of sustainability intelligence that, in our view, business needs to develop to truly become a force for spurring sustainable development. In doing so, this paper aims to add to a firm-centered conceptualization of the business-society interface in a constructive way to stimulate further discourse on the concept, and to make a theoretical contribution with respect to coupling mechanisms in the realm of business sustainability.

Introduction

Considering that current patterns of economic and social development consistently compromise the natural environment (WWF, 2016), the actual sustainability of business is increasingly being scrutinized. Many scholars have investigated, reviewed, and criticized conceptualizations of business sustainability (BST) and have developed their own interpretations of this 'essentially-contested concept' (Okoye, 2009) in order to pinpoint the essence of business sustainability and its relationship to the actual state of our planet (e.g., Dahlsrud, 2008; Matten & Moon, 2008; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Visser, 2011). Recently, the question what constitutes 'true' business sustainability has been addressed by scholars Dyllick & Muff (2016). This article is a timely and commendable attempt to explain the apparent absence of a coupling between corporate sustainability initiatives and the state of the planet (called the 'big disconnect' by the authors) and to develop a typology about business sustainability. It brings together, reflects on, and conceptualizes contributions from contemporary business and management literature about the ways in which business may be a force in spurring sustainable development (SD). In doing so, the authors aim to distinguish between different generations of BST (with BST 3.0 or 'true BST' being the pinnacle) in order to shed light on two related questions that are relevant from both an academic and practitioner perspective: "How can business make an effective contribution to resolving the sustainability challenges we are collectively facing?" and "When is business truly sustainable?" (Dyllick & Muff, 2016: 156). As such, it aims to contribute to the discourse on business sustainability and inevitably invites responses to further develop this discourse.

This paper aims to respond both critically and constructively to Dyllick & Muff's article by addressing three points. First, we point at the authors' somewhat confusing conception of what actually comprises 'true' BST or BST 3.0 and focus on the issue of business case approaches towards sustainability. Second, we comment and elaborate on their explicit choice not to address the underlying economic model and the model of consumer behavior since these are in our opinion indispensable in developing an understanding of BST 3.0. In addition to their two forms of decoupling underlying the 'big disconnect' (decoupling of the micro-level and macro-level analyses and of the performance measures used in the relations between business and society (p. 159)), we identify three forms of coupling (means-end coupling in the context of business case approaches towards sustainability, intent-effect coupling in the context of the underlying economic model, and the coupling between proximate and ultimate behavioral goals in the context of the underlying consumer model) that in our opinion also account for this phenomenon. Third, and concluding, we suggest three types of sustainability intelligence that, in our view, business needs to develop to truly become a force for SD.

Our aim with this response is not so much to identify shortcomings or inconsistencies in the authors' article, but primarily to attempt to add to their firm-centered conceptualization of the business-society interface in a constructive way, to pose some additional challenging questions in order to further thinking on BST and stimulate further discourse on the concept, and to make a theoretical contribution with respect to coupling mechanisms in the realm of BST. As such, we hope to engage in "a discussion on the meaning and types of BST" (p. 169) that the authors hope to engender with their article.

What is ‘true’? A critical view

Dyllick & Muff have taken up the formidable challenge of establishing what ‘true’ BST or BST 3.0 is, a task that has both academic and practical relevance, particularly because it may help determine the status quo of BST and assist in benchmarking progress that has been made in the relations between business and society in an SD context. As the authors recognize, many scholars and practitioners alike have tried to uncover the essence of BST. Although many concurrent interpretations exist, there does seem to be some common ground when defining BST, including an environmental, a social, an economic, a stakeholder, and a voluntariness dimension (Dahlsrud, 2008). Also, coupling policy and practice, or aligning BST claims with BST action, can be seen as a prerequisite for speaking of ‘true’ BST (cf. Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; also see Bromley & Powell, 2012).

Against the background of BST being a cluster and umbrella concept (Matten & Moon, 2008) and an essentially contested concept (Okoye, 2009), arriving at a conceptualization of ‘true’ BST may however also be a rather elusive and perhaps even undesirable task. Okoye (2009) has posited that it may not be necessary to come to such a conceptualization of ‘true’ BST. Arguing for the need for a common reference, or ‘exemplar’ (cf. Gallie, 1956), she writes: “in light of changing circumstances we can re-visit old arguments and update or re-evaluate our basis and assumptions” of BST as this may allow for “the flexibility that is necessary to address the various issues which arise within society on how best to relate with business” (p. 624). From our experience in corporate practice, we conclude that firms both look for clear benchmarks (both in terms of best practices and definitions of BST) when embarking on BST and defining idiosyncratic approaches towards it. From that perspective, Dyllick & Muff’s objective may both shed academic light on ‘true’ BST and clarify what is ‘true’ BST to benefit business endeavours in an SD context.

Their definition of BST 3.0 strikes somewhat confusing, though. Initially, Dyllick & Muff state that “[t]ruly sustainable business shifts its perspective from seeking to minimize its negative impacts to understanding how it can create a significant positive impact in critical and relevant areas for society and the planet. A BST 3.0 firm looks first at the external environment within which it operates and then asks itself what it can do to help overcome critical challenges that demand the resources and competencies it has at its disposal” (p. 165-166). The authors then proceed with stating that “a BST 3.0 firm translates sustainability challenges into business opportunities making ‘business sense’ of societal and environmental issues” (p. 166). According to them, their conception aligns with the view of the late Peter Drucker holding that “[e]very single social and global issue of our day is a business opportunity in disguise” (as cited in Cooperrider, 2008). In this light, especially with the authors contrasting their conception of BST 3.0 with Porter & Kramer’s concept of creating shared value (CSV), one may seriously question what the difference is between BST 3.0 and CSV. This seems a legitimate issue as Dyllick & Muff seem to have possible tensions in mind between business and society when they write that “[b]ecoming a truly sustainable business clearly is a challenge for companies, particularly for commercial business” and ask a question that Porter & Kramer have sought to answer with CSV: “Is it indeed realistic to expect commercially oriented corporations to focus their strategies on solving sustainability challenges and creating value for the common good?” (p. 170).

Indeed, the phrasings on translating sustainability into business opportunities and making business sense of sustainability seem to be positioned right in the heart of business case thinking around BST that has dominated modern discourse. To us, as to, for instance, Crane et al. (2014), such a conception does not escape the straitjacket of being obsessed by achieving economic value on the firm-level through sustainability efforts. As such, it is doubtful whether the authors’ idea of BST 3.0 adds to existing discourse and to what extent BST 3.0 is truly conceptually different from BST 2.0.

Interestingly, the questions that Dyllick & Muff pose directly after their definition of BST 3.0 (p. 166) may better reflect their ideas of what comprises ‘true’ sustainability as these are not constrained by economic performance indicators on the firm-level, but build on the possibilities that business has, for instance in their resource wealth, operations, governance structures, and competencies, to contribute to ecological quality and social justice. The authors hence seem to be at odds with their own conception of BST 3.0, an observation that is augmented by their belief that “[s]ustainability demands an integration of social and environmental issues with economic issues” (p. 162). It is not entirely clear what Dyllick & Muff mean here. Do they imply that this integration of economic issues is an essential component in conceptually interpreting sustainability? Or does it reflect a more pragmatic stance, for instance informed by experience in practice, that sustainability in the sense of achieving ecological quality and social justice cannot be achieved without making it relevant for business or placing an economic value on it? In our conception, sustainability does not include economic or business aspects per se, but focuses on the intrinsic values of ecological quality and social justice, and not their relationship with or dependence on economic or business value (cf. Destatte, 2010). An advantage of such an approach towards sustainability, in our opinion, is that it allows for a better reflection on the existing, possible, and desired relationships between the higher-order values of ecological quality and social justice on the hand and business and economic value on the other.

This brings us to our second point in this response.

The morality of markets and business cases

While recognizing their interrelatedness to the shifts required to making BST 3.0 a reality, Dyllick & Muff explicitly mention at the outset of their article that they do "not address the required changes in the underlying economic model or the model of consumer behavior" (p. 157). We think that in order to come to an understanding of what 'true' sustainability comprises, it is actually essential to include reflections on both models.

The underlying economic model

As the market mechanism is the most powerful coordinating mechanism in modern society and the narrative of economic prosperity has been dominant in the way many people make sense of reality, they have inevitably penetrated discourse in many academic fields and realms of society, notably that of BST. Carroll & Shabana (2010) observed that the business case approach to BST is the most prevalent in academic literature and Porter & Kramer's CSV concept has proven to be popular in business practice, where it has the status of being common vocabulary. Cochran (2007) heralded the business case approach by proclaiming it to be the most important intellectual breakthrough regarding modern conceptions of BST.

However, there is reason to be critical on this point since business case approaches towards BST suggest an innate coupling (similar to the one suggested by the phrasing that sustainability also demands the integration of economic issues) between environmental and social values on the one hand and economic values on the other. Under the guise of an integration that juxtaposes these values, business case approaches essentially point at a means-end coupling in which addressing ecological and social issues is a means towards the end of achieving economic business performance. So while business case approaches may be viewed to offer a pragmatic solution to the disconnect between sustainability efforts by business and SD, they suffer from a fundamental flaw in thinking that puts economic value above all other (cf. Moratis, 2014). In a way, an integration of economic issues into the concept of sustainability is not that much different from what Dyllick & Muff call the Friedmanian fallacy (p. 162) when one takes into account that the 'rules of the game', which business should respect and operate within according to Friedman, have changed in the sense that the business environment puts more emphasis on ecological and social issues. Achieving 'economically-constrained sustainability' is troublesome since many analysts and observers agree that the dominance of economic reasoning is a root cause of an era of unsustainability. In retrospect, one may even question to what extent the pragmatic solutions that business case approaches have offered have truly benefited sustainability: despite the uptake and encouragement of such approaches worldwide by firms, governments, and NGOs alike, the world, at best, has witnessed only limited progress in SD, particularly on the social dimension and issues such as poverty and human well-being (UNDP, 2015).

Obviously, business case approaches may also be criticized from other points of view. They may encourage opportunistic cherry-picking of societal issues by firms, leave institutional barriers for spurring SD intact, and risk driving out intrinsic motivation for sustainability (Nijhof & Jeurissen, 2010). While it is beyond the scope of this response to elaborate on this, we would like to add here to these criticisms that thinking in terms of the business case does not seem to be a persuasive argument for taking corporate sustainability efforts and hence does not provide the solace to overcome the 'big disconnect' (p. 156; cf. Visser, 2011). As all of us in the field of sustainability are inconveniently aware of, the reason why so many businesses are not actively involved in BST is that there is an existing, and most of the time better or at least sufficient, business case for them to not address sustainability issues. Relevant in this regard are the findings of a recent report by Bertels et al. (2016) on the reasons why CEOs are not prioritizing sustainability: CEOs indicate that they have insufficient knowledge about linking environmental and social issues to the business, were unable to establish why sustainability mattered to their business, and – when they did have an understanding of the link – chose to focus on competing priorities. Clearly, as the report shows, sustainability sensemaking processes within business take place within the business case frame of reference. The narrative of modern-day sustainability hence is firmly embedded in the search for economic value, leading to the question to what extent BST and SD can realistically be connected at all. When reflecting on business case approaches towards sustainability, it should strike one as rather odd that a solution for SD is being sought through focusing on exactly the same type of practices and reasoning that have compromised SD in the first place.

In our view, therefore, sustainability efforts should actually not be constrained by a positive answer to the question whether there is a business case to be found in them. In fact, abandoning the application of a business case way of reasoning to sustainability may reveal what comprises 'true' BST: a meaningful contribution by business to sustainable development that is neither induced nor limited by a business case perspective.

The recently launched Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can serve as a case in point. The SDGs may be considered as a global sustainability agenda since they highlight many of the most pressing sustainability challenges that the world is currently facing. While most of the SDGs unmistakably apply to the realm of many large and influential multinational enterprises and the issue of climate change is arguably relevant for every business activity, performing a materiality analysis of the SDGs for the lion's share of the world's companies would undeniably result in most of the SDGs being 'not material', not even in the long-term. And despite the fact that entrepreneurial minds will always be able to find business opportunities in such goals in one way or another, it is quite hard to imagine broad-based business cases in the SDGs. From a business perspective, it would then be advisable to not focus on these goals and thus neglect pivotal mechanisms for SD. At the same time, it would be nonsensical to deny the importance of the SDGs – the goals represent values that most people would say are fundamental. In other words, the fact that SDGs may not represent material issues for business nor contain apparent business cases for most companies is no reason to dismiss them. In fact, the SDGs serve as an illustration of SD issues that individual businesses may not have a substantial impact on or be able to profit from economically, but can still contribute to in ways suggested by the questions raised by Dyllick & Muff in the context of BST 3.0 (p. 166) and beyond the realm of (current) business processes (including philanthropic activities by business). In fact, we think that there is a moral obligation for businesses to contribute to the SDGs. It should be added that even if there were robust and widespread business cases to be found in the SDGs, this would not say anything about the values many people around the world share and the 'global' consensus that was reached on the goals. In a sense, then, it may just be a 'fringe benefit' that business cases can be found in the SDGs by some companies, since this would ease the efforts of letting them and other businesses, that would not get involved in this agenda otherwise, embrace them.

From this perspective, challenging questions arise around SD for commercially oriented corporations, including: What if business opportunities just aren't there? What if the business case for not engaging in BST is better or more convenient than for engaging in BST? Why should there be business opportunities in SD anyway? What is it that our pre-occupation with the business case in an SD context surfaces time and again, despite the considerable level of public distrust in companies within an SD context? To what extent do we really think that the commons should be governed by a category of organizations of which most seem to uphold economic principles above and beyond all else?

The case of ISO 26000, which is also used by Dyllick & Muff for illustrative purposes, is interesting in this light, because, while the standard does mention possible business benefits of addressing sustainability (social responsibility), its definition of sustainability does not include or refer to business case elements, but focuses on the impacts of companies. Moratis (2016) consequently concluded that ISO 26000 breaks with the business case paradigm and takes a moral turn towards sustainability. In addition, the ISO 26000 standard illustrates our previous point on the SDGs since it urges businesses to focus their sustainability efforts on those issues which they have a significant impact on.

Underlying this argumentation is the subject of the morality of markets. In recent years, many economic philosophers have emphasized that markets are not value neutral (e.g., Sedlacek, 2011), but also that markets tend to erode values (e.g., Sandel, 2012) and that markets crowd out virtues (Graafland, 2009). What this tells us, is that the market as society's dominant coordination mechanism may thus not be a force for sustainable change, but a mechanism that is its main constraint or even enemy. While one's position in this matter also depends on one's political beliefs, in any case, this suggests markets are not neutral to the values underlying SD.

In addition to the earlier mentioned policy-practice coupling and means-end coupling, this points at another form of coupling that is relevant from the perspective of 'true' BST: the coupling between intent and effect. Against the background of value-biased markets, BST efforts may have perverted results, even under the condition of aligned policy and practice, as the effects of firms' actions may be affected by the mere functioning of markets (cf. Liket, 2014). By implication, for 'true' BST to occur, its intent should not be guided by business case approaches as this would be the wrong starting point to ensure intact outcomes in ecological and social dimensions. If a firm's sustainability efforts turn out – thus, unintendedly – to deliver economic benefits, then there is nothing wrong with it, we would say. The question here is: What is worth intent when it is 'washed' by market mechanisms that erode or crowd-out values? To be totally clear on this, it is our view that it is not that business should not be allowed to profit from their sustainability efforts – we question whether this economic rationale should be the starting point.

'True' business sustainability, in our view, should actually be rooted in the ambition to change the system it is part of instead of settling for compliance with or surrendering to market mechanisms. In other words, moving towards BST 3.0 may require a new social contract between business and society in which sustainability is a non-negotiable item. In the old social contract, the relationship between business and society is primarily defined through the functioning of markets as a transaction; a new contract should be defined by letting this relationship escape the economic orthodoxy of markets and become social again (cf. Painter-Morland, 2013). While Dyllick & Muff seem to acknowledge this when referring to changing the rules of the game (p. 167), it may be more suitable from a BST 3.0 perspective to change the game altogether. In our view, there is a substantial difference between the examples given by the authors of adjusting "accounting rules and standards for disclosing and internalizing sustainability risks and impacts" and "lobbying for taxes on resource consumption" (ibid.) on the one hand and, for instance, producing innovative products of which the consumption actually contributes to sustainable development, adopting cooperative structures that radically democratize ownership, helping to develop citizen-led sustainability initiatives, and engaging in sustainability efforts for ethical rather than economic reasons on the other.

The model of consumer behavior

Under the assumption that consumption is a key factor in (un)sustainability (e.g., Schaefer & Crane, 2005) and the relatively low percentages of sustainable consumption, understanding consumer behavior is essential when interpreting BST 3.0. Only then can companies develop consumer behavior into a lever for SD. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, it has been argued that ingrained, ancestral traits of human behavior are barriers for sustainability since they are at odds with our modern environment (cf. Penn, 2003; Gifford, 2011). Griskevicius et al. (2012) pose that "many modern environmental and social problems are caused or exacerbated by five evolutionary tendencies: (1) propensity for genetic self-interest, (2) motivation for relative rather than absolute status, (3) proclivity to unconsciously copy others, (4) predisposition to be shortsighted, and (5) proneness to disregard impalpable concerns" (p. 115-116). While the functioning of markets and human psychology obviously relate to each other, changing the latter may prove to be even more difficult than the former, if not outright impossible. In the context of BST, and particularly BST 3.0, this raises additional challenging questions: Is it possible for businesses to truly contribute to sustainability within a consumer model driven by these factors? To what extent, if at all, should we rely on the voluntary act of consuming in our collective ambition towards sustainability? Would it possible to view these barriers as behavioral mechanisms that can be used as levers towards sustainability rather than letting sustainability be compromised by them?

According to Griskevicius et al. (2012) there are possibilities to work with these characteristics of the human psychology rather than bringing it to the table as an excuse for not producing sustainable products. They argue that "influence strategies [towards social change] might be more effective when they are matched to the evolutionary mechanism driving the problematic behavior" (p. 117), so that "marketers, social entrepreneurs, and policy makers can harness and redirect people's evolutionary tendencies to lessen or even eradicate environmental problems" (p. 125). Contributing to sustainability through consumption hence is possible if firms manage to develop strategies to harness the evolutionary 'condition humaine' of consumers. An increasingly popular and promising strategy in this regard is the so-called nudging, which is defined as "any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives" (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008: 6). Nudging in the context of for instance encouraging green mobility and promoting healthy food choices may include strategies of altering availability, changing default choices, and priming through making choices more mentally available. Whereas marketers have deployed similar strategies for decades in order to increase sales of whatever (unsustainable) products, in the light of BST 3.0 firms could develop such strategies to increase ecological quality and social justice by putting people's health and well-being first.

In addition to the two other forms of coupling already identified in this paper, this perspective on the consumer model thus reveals a third coupling that is relevant in a BST 3.0 context, namely that of proximate and ultimate behavioral goals (cf. Kenrick, 2010 et al.; Tinbergen, 1963). It should be noted that this coupling exists against an automatic, unconscious background when looking from a consumer perspective and against a purposively, conscious background from a business perspective.

Concluding: towards developing sustainability intelligence for BST 3.0

This response has sought to critically examine the definition of BST 3.0, or 'true' business sustainability, as proposed by Dyllick & Muff (2016) in a recent article in this journal and concluded that the authors' interpretation may be somewhat confusing. In doing so, we have highlighted the need for BST 3.0 to escape the straitjacket of business case approaches towards the role of business in society and have included some reflections on the models of the market and the consumer model, which Dyllick & Muff have explicitly left out of their analysis, but which are in our opinion necessary to include to come to a better understanding of what BST 3.0 may comprise. Also, we identified three forms of coupling in addition to the common coupling of policy-practice, namely means-end coupling in the context of business case approaches towards sustainability, intent-effect coupling in the context of the underlying economic model, and proximate-ultimate coupling in the context of the underlying consumer model, to add to the two forms of decoupling that the authors bring forth for explaining the 'big disconnect' between BST and the state of the planet.

Finally, to add a novel perspective to the discussion that the authors hope to engender with their typology of BST and interpretation of BST 3.0, we want to propose three types of sustainability intelligence that we think are necessary for business to develop 'true' BST: naive, native, and narrative intelligence (cf. Melissen & Moratis, 2016; Melissen & Moratis, 2017).

First, to achieve BST 3.0, firms need naive intelligence to escape the pathway formed by current and generally applied, mostly unsustainable, business models and envision new, truly sustainable value creation processes that do not yet exist or have not yet been applied. In our view, business should embrace rather than reject a certain level of naivety in their strategic and organizational decision-making to avoid the sort of systemic and cognitive lock-in created by operating in (market) environments characterized by taken-for-granted elements, such as the continuous pursuit of maximizing profits, ever larger market shares, and providing the highest possible return on investment for shareholders (cf. Dyllick & Muff's concepts of BST 1.0 and 2.0). Naivety then includes a sort of freshness, an openness, and an intuitiveness towards ideas that may shape a future that can be, rather than a future that is simply a replication, projection, or extrapolation of the past.

Second, native intelligence relates to the role of evolutionary psychological processes that underlie models of consumer behavior. BST 3.0 in our view requires firms to understand the evolutionary roots of human behaviour and their role in day-to-day decision-making. Recognizing this 'nativity' may enable firms to work with evolutionary processes rather than be constrained by them. BST 3.0 firms realize that they can promote sustainable consumer behaviour by understanding human behaviour. Native intelligence then means that firms not only are aware of the psychological limitations of humans in developing sustainable behaviour, but also have the ability to turn these limitations into opportunities by learning to work with them. It should be noted that possessing native intelligence would also enable and encourage firms to reflect on their own behaviours and assumptions behind it from this perspective.

Third, narrative intelligence reflects the fact that people are 'narrative animals' and thus acknowledges an important aspect of human psychology in the progress of thought (Mateas & Sengers, 1999). However, narrative intelligence is more than simply being open and able to translate and transfer experience into and through stories respectively. As Denning writes in his book 'The secret language of leadership', narrative intelligence "reflects a recognition that the narrative aspects of the world matter because human goals matter, and narratives encapsulate human goals" (Denning, 2007: 45). Narrative intelligence, in our conception, is fundamentally about sensemaking, defined as an interpretive process in which people assign meanings to ongoing occurrences (Wagner & Gooding, 1997; cf. Weick, 1995). In order to achieve BST 3.0, business needs narrative intelligence as well in the sense that they build on a recursive and iterative process of exploring and experimenting with possible futures (cf. naive intelligence) and that they require firms not only to recognize stakeholders and their characteristics, but also to truly engage with them in this process (cf. native intelligence). Bearing this in mind, narrative intelligence goes well beyond communicating and even storytelling. Through a co-creation process with their stakeholders it enables firms that want to develop 'true' BST to create joint interpretation mechanisms and attach shared meaning to the interface of business and society.

When one concludes from the 'big disconnect' that sustainability and the relationship between business and society need a new story, BST 3.0 firms should be willing and able to play their part in creating that story.

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Declarations

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