

# Building on Spash's critiques of monetary valuation to suggest ways forward for relational values research

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**Abstract**

Scholars have critiqued mainstream economic approaches to environmental valuation for decades. These critiques have intensified with the increased prominence of environmental valuation in decision-making. This paper has three goals. First, we summarise prominent critiques of monetary valuation, drawing mostly on the work of Clive Spash, who worked extensively on cost–benefit analysis early in his career and then became one of monetary valuation’s most thorough and ardent critics. Second, we, as a group of scholars who study relational values, describe how relational values research engages with and addresses many of the critiques of monetary valuation. Third, we offer suggestions for relational values research that continues and deepens its ability to respond to critiques of monetary valuation and contributes to transformative change towards sustainability.

**Keywords**

Decision-making, ecosystem services, environmental ethics, environmental valuation, monetary valuation, policy, value of nature

**Introduction**

The past five decades have seen dramatic development in the field of environmental valuation. The field arguably did not exist prior to the 1970s, built to a peak of almost exclusively monetary valuation in the 1990s, then experienced intense scrutiny and critiques of monetisation in the new millennium. Criticism of monetary valuation has grown in breadth with the passage of time: it began as methods-related refinement and has expanded to include fundamental epistemological critiques. Clive Spash’s work illustrates this arc while also proving foundational for much valuation scholarship: he ‘wrote the book’ on cost–benefit analysis in the 1990s (Hanley and Spash, 1994), yet in the past two decades has offered numerous scathing critiques of that very technique. Hence, focusing on his scholarship helps to understand where the field has been and where we need to go.

Spash is a skilled critic. His writings take both sledgehammer and scalpel to the paradigm of monetary valuation and have become ‘go-to’ resources for researchers seeking to understand that paradigm’s evidentiary basis, theoretical assumptions and ethical implications. Although he focuses on critique, Spash provides general suggestions for moving forward – for example, to incorporate rights-based approaches, use deliberative methods and be critically reflexive (i.e., recognise that valuation entails particular ways of understanding and interacting with the world). Moreover, Spash’s work reflects a growing recognition in environmental research and management of the necessity of engaging with non-dominant perspectives (e.g., feminist and Indigenous perspectives; Spash, 2013; Spash and Aslaksen, 2015; West et al., 2020).

In this paper, we build on Spash’s critiques by synthesising their essence and carrying them forward into a recommended set of suggestions for relational values (henceforth RV) research. This paper is not meant to be a critique of Spash’s work, but rather an effort to build on his intellectual legacy by engaging it through the lens of recent developments in relational values. To honour Spash’s (and others’, e.g., Jacobs et al., 2020)

calls for the importance of reflexivity in values research, we first situate ourselves in the field. Most of us (PA, MC, RG, AH, DL, BM, MT) have been involved in scholarship about relational values, that is, the preferences, principles and virtues associated with meaningful human relationships with nature (Chan et al., 2016; Himes et al., 2023). In collaboration with others, we have developed synthetic perspectives on the field (Muraca, 2011, 2016; Chan et al., 2016, 2018; Arias-Arévalo et al., 2017; Tadaki et al., 2017; Himes and Muraca, 2018; Chapman and Deplazes-Zemp, 2023; Himes et al., 2023; Raymond et al. 2023). Although our training ranges from philosophy (DL, BM) and interdisciplinary social sciences (LA, MC, RG, MT) to economics (PA) and the natural sciences (AH), we have each been inspired by Spash's work and consider the concept of relational values highly relevant. With this paper, we aim to distil the contribution of RV scholarship by showing how it addresses fundamental critiques of monetary valuation; we also offer suggestions for how RV research can further develop to support engaged, more-than-monetary environmental valuation.

In sum, in this piece, we build upon Spash's suggestions to better incorporate more value types, deliberative methods, reflexivity and a wider variety of perspectives into environmental valuation, with a focus on the contributions of the RV concept. We first distil the multifaceted critiques of environmental valuation, as exemplified by Spash's work ('Critiques of environmental valuation' section). We then consider how relational values address those critiques ('How relational values engage Spash's critiques and provide a way forward for valuation' section). We conclude by proposing suggestions for RV research based on insight gleaned from both our own experience and Spash's work ('Spash-inspired suggestions for relational values research' section).

## **Critiques of environmental valuation**

In this section, we briefly synthesise Spash's critiques of mainstream economic approaches to environmental valuation into three core themes. These themes overlap, intertwine and depend on one another in interesting and important ways; we elaborate them separately because they are not reducible to each other, and because we think that the themes provide a helpful heuristic device to make sense of a complex set of inter-related arguments.

### ***Critique 1. Economics is not value-free but is based on a specific and contested moral philosophy***

Spash refutes the characterisation of economics as a value-free science and the assumption that economic approaches like monetary valuation are ethically neutral (Spash, 2006, 2008a). Instead, he contends, economics endorses one specific moral philosophy, namely utilitarianism.<sup>1</sup> As Spash argues, mainstream economics assumes that the net utility resulting from an action determines whether that action should be pursued or not (Spash, 1997), which arbitrarily narrows the ethical basis of public policy choices (Spash, 1999).

In his critique, Spash draws on O'Neill's (1993) argument that utilitarianism is a contested moral philosophy, rather than a consensus moral standard (Spash, 1997,

2013; Spash et al., 2004). He has two main concerns. First, utilitarianism commodifies nature, which expresses ethically inappropriate attitudes towards nature (e.g., dominance and exploitation) rather than more respectful human–nature relationships (Spash, 2015; Spash and Aslaksen, 2015). Second, utilitarianism converts entire generations into utility-maximising single agents (Spash, 1993; Spash and Hache, 2021), which severely restricts intergenerational justice, as controversy about discount rates reveals (Spash, 1993, 1999).<sup>2</sup>

As an example, Spash cites empirical evidence that many people endorse deontological ethics towards nature, even in the context of studies that use economics framing (O'Neill and Spash, 2000; Spash et al., 2009). He points out that the utilitarianism that underlies mainstream economics fails to include deontological considerations, especially that some actions are morally unacceptable in themselves even if performing them would produce greater net utility for society (O'Neill and Spash, 2000; Spash et al., 2009). Spash advocates for greater attention to intrinsic values: specifically, the idea that nature, ecosystems and species cannot be reduced to instrumental considerations, but rather have absolute and inviolable rights to exist and be protected for their own sake (Spash, 1997, 1998, 2006, 2015; Spash and Aslaksen, 2015). Protecting nature's intrinsic values implies recognising these values as inconsistent with cost–benefit analysis – and thus inconsistent with economic reasoning (Spash, 1999, 2000a, 2008a, 2015, 2022). As such, decisions about nature are better framed as moral concerns rather than optimisation problems to be solved via reference to individuals' preferences or economic resources (Spash, 1993; O'Neill and Spash, 2000). In sum, Spash's work exposes the ways in which purportedly technical assessments of monetary valuation are not value-free.

### ***Critique 2. The aggregation of substitutable preferences over-simplifies diverse values of nature***

In mainstream economics, non-human nature is conceived as capital, goods or services that can be substituted (Spash and Hache, 2021). This approach derives nature's value from the aggregation of individual consumer preferences (revealed by markets or contingent valuation methods) for these substitutable goods and services (Spash, 2015). Such commodified conceptions of nature undergird cost–benefit analysis, the natural capital approach (Spash, 1994, 2007; Spash and Hache, 2021) and instruments such as biodiversity offsets (Spash, 2015).

The substitutability of capital, goods or services in mainstream economics is rooted in the methodological assumption that individual preferences are commensurable and can be, in principle, aggregated (see also recent use of 'social values' to refer to aggregated values; Spash and Hache, 2021). In substitutability-based conceptions, individual actors are viewed as identical, passive, asocial and ahistorical agents (Spash, 2008b, 2011a; Spash and Hache, 2021). Preferences are assumed to be constructed at the individual level, uninfluenced by social phenomena (Spash and Vatn, 2006), and are modelled using deductive reasoning and mathematical formalism (Spash and Ryan, 2012; Spash, 2013), which calculates social welfare as the *aggregate* of individual gains or losses (Spash, 1998).

The implications of mainstream economics' assumptions are profound and wide-ranging: because these assumptions enable aggregation of individuals' preferences, they imply that all values are commensurable and substitutable in principle – aggregation would otherwise not be possible (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998). If all values are commensurable, they can always be compared or weighed against each other. This makes it possible, for example, to directly compare the spiritual value of a sacred mountain to the monetary value of a mineral extracted from it (Temper and Martinez-Alier, 2013). If all values are substitutable, harm can in principle be compensated by 'good' of a corresponding amount. This means, for instance, that an infringement on human or non-human rights can be compensated by money or material goods (Spash, 1994, 2011a, 2013; Spash and Aslaksen, 2015; Spash and Hache, 2021).

In addition, the emphasis of mainstream economics on individual agents ignores how power relations, inequities (Spash, 2015) and social context shape individual preferences (Spash and Vatn, 2006; Spash, 2008b). One notable example of lack of attention to context is benefit transfer: the often inappropriate transfer of monetary values calculated for a specific project to other socio-economic and environmental contexts (Spash et al., 2004; Spash and Vatn, 2006; Spash, 2008a, 2015). Mainstream approaches that attempt to aggregate individual preferences and treat them as substitutable metrics of valuation across contexts over-simplify the diverse, incommensurate and often socially determined values of nature.

### *Critique 3. Mainstream economic methods capture only a narrow spectrum of human values*

Spash extends his critique to the dominant economic methods used in environmental decision-making (e.g., cost–benefit analysis, contingent valuation, temporal discounting; Spash, 2009). These methods are associated with the *value-articulating institution* that orthodox economics employs (Vatn, 2005; Spash and Vatn, 2006). Value-articulating institutions are constructed sets of rules that manifest (often implicitly) a body of values by defining four factors: a) who participates; b) how participation occurs; c) what data are considered relevant; and d) how those data are used in the process of eliciting values (Vatn, 2005). For example, mainstream valuation methods constrain participation by limiting value expression to the metric of monetary units, which can cause 'crowding out' of non-utilitarian values (Spash and Aslaksen, 2015; Chan et al., 2017).

Economic valuation methods also restrict how data are used, going as far as to frame responses and behaviours that do not fit the economic model as irrational and inexplicable (Spash, 2000b). They thus downplay, ignore and exclude this 'irrational', 'non-economic behaviour' (and in doing so distort reality; Spash, 1998, 2000b, 2008a, 2009, 2015, 2022). Examples include framing responses that reject trade-offs as anomalies (Spash, 1998); removing fairness-based or outlier bids (Spash, 2007, 2008b) and excluding 'protest zeros' – that is, responses of Willingness-to-Pay of \$0 because, in respondents' not-infrequent reports, the good or service in question is priceless and putting a dollar value on it is morally unacceptable (Spash, 2006).

Spash condemns 'pragmatic' environmental valuation efforts that assign monetary value to non-human nature to gain recognition from governments and businesses,

which are perceived to only respond to dominant economic reasoning (Spash, 2009, 2011b). This ‘new environmental pragmatism’ relies on an over-simplification of the values people have for and towards nature (Spash and Aslaksen, 2015, 250). It also raises procedural justice concerns. Under monetary valuation, Spash writes, ‘a range of silent and silenced voices [lack] representation. The former include other-than-humans, future generations and children; and the latter women under patriarchy, indigenous communities under colonialism, the uneducated in productivist societies and the financially poor under capitalism’ (Spash, 2022, 9). In sum, Spash argues that relying solely on economic methods for environmental decision-making provides a skewed and incomplete representation of the value of non-human nature, which can lead to erroneous conclusions and bad decisions.

### *Section summary*

These three critiques, though deeply entwined, build on one another to demonstrate the mode by which mainstream economic approaches have over-simplified and constrained representations of the diverse values of nature. These approaches’ particular reading of utilitarian moral philosophy justifies the aggregation and transfer of incommensurate values, which in turn lends itself to research methods that exclude or misrepresent non-utilitarian and deontological values and silence the voices of those who endorse them.

## **How relational values engage Spash’s critiques and provide a way forward for valuation**

Besides offering rich critiques of monetary valuation, Spash proposes remedies in two main arenas: rights-based approaches (based on intrinsic values) and deliberative processes (to represent plural values). We offer an additional approach that, we suggest, can help address Spash’s critiques in multiple ways: relational values. Only in recent years has RV become a major topic of environmental values literature; most RV literature thus post-dates the bulk of Spash’s work, although he recently took note of RV’s existence in environmental values literature (Spash, 2022). Below, we describe relational values and then detail how they can engage, sustain and respond to Spash’s critiques.

### *The basics of relational values*

Drawing on Chan et al. (2016) and the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Methodological Assessment on the Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature (IPBES, 2022), we understand RV as ‘preferences, principles and virtues associated with relationships’, that ‘refer to the importance of desirable, meaningful, and often reciprocal relationships – beyond means to an end – between humans and nature, and among humans (including across generations) through nature’ (Anderson et al., 2022, 33). Examples of RV include place-based meaning, care, responsibility and reciprocal obligations with non-human others and values of identities embedded in relationships with land.

RV (as defined above) emerged in the early 2010s as a third option to the then-established dichotomy of ways to understand nature’s value: intrinsic and

instrumental value (Muraca, 2011). This dichotomy represents two understandings of nature’s value: ‘nature for its own sake’ (regardless of reference to people’s needs or preferences<sup>3</sup>) and ‘nature for us’ (as provider of benefits and services to society). Muraca (2011) and others (Jax et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2016) pointed out that many ways in which people express the value of nature and human–nature relationships do not fit either side of the intrinsic–instrumental dichotomy. In particular, neither approach adequately represents values associated with non-instrumental, reciprocal and meaningful relationships between people and nature, and between people through nature. The term ‘relational values’ came to signify this underrepresented category. Importantly, RV tend to be especially relevant to many marginalised social groups, including Indigenous, local and rural communities. Since their inception, RV have aligned closely with (and drawn conceptually from) feminist theory, anti-colonial theory and global environmental justice movements (Muraca, 2016). Though ethicists debate whether relational values are philosophically new (Stålhammar and Thorén, 2019; James, 2022) in the environmental valuation space they seem to provide a container for many expressions of values that were largely invisible within the intrinsic–instrumental dichotomy (Chapman et al., 2019; Gould et al., 2019b).

In the mid-2010s, RV gained wider prominence largely in association with their uptake in the IPBES conceptual framework (Díaz et al., 2015; Chan et al., 2016, 2018; Pascual et al., 2017). Although there is still a wide debate about how to conceptualise and apply RV, scholars have suggested identifying their meaning through a few core characteristics (Deplazes-Zemp and Chapman, 2021; Gould et al., 2023; Himes et al., 2023; see Table 1).

*How relational values research responds to Spash’s critiques*

*RV expand beyond mainstream economics’ utilitarian moral underpinnings.* Spash makes the crucial suggestion that environmental valuation must recognise and then expand beyond economics’ utilitarian underpinnings. Yet in his powerful rejection of mainstream

**Table 1.** Differences between instrumental, intrinsic and relational values.

	Instrumental values	Intrinsic values	Relational values
Focus	What entities provide to people as a means to an end	Entities that are ends themselves, whose value is expressed independently of reference to people	Relationships between people and nature, or between people with respect to nature
Relationship to instrumentality	Instrumental by definition	Not instrumental in any way	Not solely instrumental (can have instrumental threads)
Substitutability <sup>6</sup>	Always substitutable in principle, if not in practice	Non-substitutable in principle (uniqueness of valued entity)	Non-substitutable in principle (uniqueness and specificity of relation)

economics, Spash often relies on a dualistic, oppositional framework (intrinsic vs. utilitarian (monetary) values; non-anthropocentrism vs. anthropocentrism). He largely neglects alternative articulations of value, although he recently mentioned RV as a possibility for plural valuation (Spash, 2022). We suggest that RV, with their focus on relationships, can enrich the possibilities for how to move beyond economics' utilitarianism, per Spash's recommendations, in at least two ways.

First, RV scholarship highlights that intrinsic values are not the only ones obscured by market-based methods. RV research helps illuminate issues of environmental and recognitional justice that are linked to ignoring both relational and intrinsic values. Spash opens the door to this idea when he advocates for plural and diverse values. He writes, for instance, that 'a range of ethical positions (e.g., intrinsic value, rights, virtues) might give absolute protection to a species regardless of the cost' (Spash, 2015, 544). RV have been connected to virtues by emphasising, for example, obligations of reciprocity with and care for nature (Chan et al., 2016). From a RV perspective, however, the '*absolute*' protection of a species or an ecosystem may not be desirable in all cases – for example, if this means protection disentangled from significant reciprocal relationships that include and require judicious use of some ecosystem elements. This highlights an important distinction between relational and intrinsic values. Intrinsic values are often associated with rights-based consideration regardless of reference to people; RV, instead, emphasise reciprocal and mutually dependent relationships (Himes et al., 2023). By foregrounding values such as care and reciprocity, RV move beyond more traditional deontological perspectives in environmental ethics, to include virtue, eudaimonic and care ethics (Lenzi, 2017; Gould et al., 2019b).

Second, RV scholarship highlights an alternative to utilitarian moral philosophy that does not necessarily rely on intrinsic or non-anthropocentric values. While Spash discusses anthropocentrism and economic utilitarianism together (Spash, 2015), tacitly implying that using and transforming nature reduces it to a mere means to human ends, RV reframes the anthropocentrism debate: it suggests a form of anthropocentrism that expands beyond narrow, exclusive human interests, but is highly relevant to human decision-making. RV approaches open the door for a weak – or relational (Muraca, 2011) – anthropocentrism<sup>4</sup> that is compatible with strong sustainability and highlights the value of non-instrumental, respectful and responsible relationships with other-than-humans. This includes the many ways people interact with, transform and sometimes improve ecosystems and stresses how ecosystem services are often mediated by people's work and care. Putting the rich meaning of interactions at the centre of analysis can foreground the question of responsibility in framing these interventions. RV also include relationships to place, the land and other-than-humans that constitute individual and collective identity and highlight the relational nature of being human. Accordingly, RV encompass values that might be anthropocentric (like instrumental values) but are non-substitutable (like intrinsic values; Himes and Muraca, 2018).

*Relational values offer a specific alternative to aggregation and substitutability.* RV offer a specific way to counter market-based valuation and thus bring non-monetary values to the table. Many of Spash's critiques of market approaches are related to the idea that people hold non-substitutable values. RV belong to this non-substitutable group. RV



might not be helpful in decision-making contexts wherein relevant data are strongly prescribed – for example, decision-making processes limited to ‘best available [natural] science’ or that only consider economic benefits and costs (Charnley et al., 2017; Manfredi et al., 2019). Yet other existing decision-making processes involve mechanisms that would allow RV to be included (Barton et al., 2022). Examples include consideration of culturally significant areas (Gee et al., 2017) or the use of oral histories as testimony.

RV research is expanding values scholarship – empirical research shows that RV covers a semantic field otherwise neglected by intrinsic or instrumental language. This includes qualitative work elaborating particular RV (e.g., Chapman et al., 2019; Ono et al., 2021; Riechers et al., 2022) and surveys designed to assess RV, both generally (e.g., Klain et al., 2017; Saito et al., 2022) and in specific contexts (e.g., Arias-Arévalo et al., 2017; See et al., 2020). To date, this work has largely focused on eliciting RV from individuals (though some studies define relational values shared by or held by groups, e.g., Kenter et al., 2015; Gould et al., 2019b).

*Relational values capture a more diverse and equitable array of nature’s values.* RV scholarship expands on the idea of representing silenced voices by highlighting contextual and specific practices, meanings and embodiments through which human–nature relations are uniquely articulated in ways that merely instrumental terms cannot capture. Besides a general attention to procedural justice (representation in formal processes), RV draw attention to epistemic or recognitional justice (justice related to adequate recognition of diverse human ways of interacting with and understanding the world; Pascual et al., 2014; Lenzi et al., 2023). Key to this contribution to epistemic/recognitional justice is the resonance of RV with multiple Indigenous and local knowledge traditions, in which ideas of ‘nature’ or ‘nature for its own sake’ often make little sense in the face of a web of reciprocal responsibilities and obligations that cross boundaries. For example, RV can expand Spash’s suggested rights-oriented approach to include attention to reciprocal interaction (which are often particularly, though by no means exclusively, important in Indigenous and care ethics; Whyte and Cuomo, 2016). Part of this reciprocal interaction, scholars have argued, is mutual ‘listening’ between humans and the non-human world (Staddon et al., 2021) as expressed in both settler and Indigenous knowledge systems (Cruikshank, 2007; Kimmerer, 2017; Hagen and Gould, 2022).

Policies and programs often promote and leave space for particular types of nature’s values – both implicitly and explicitly (Chapman et al., 2020). For example, farmers in the US Northwest resisted participating in a conservation program that seemed to rebuke their RV (Chapman et al., 2019). PES or market-based conservation programs often assume and promote nature’s instrumental value (Vatn, 2010; Rode et al., 2015). Fortress conservation (and the related, more recent Half-Earth movement) can be seen as manifestations of nature’s intrinsic value, yet could in practise separate people from nature (Schleicher et al., 2019). Approaches to conservation based on RV, instead, would highlight and allow for a wider array of forms of meaning and use – for example, policies that focus on cultural keystone species (Turner, 1988), centre food and livelihood sovereignty (Chappell, 2013; Ayaviri Matuk et al., 2019) or support convivial conservation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2019).

RV can open up debates for a broader conception of what matters, to whom and why. RV approaches open debates to consider a more complete set of values and their trade-offs. In this way, they allow for wider ethical deliberation. Whereas monetary valuation side-steps difficult discussions and intrinsic values tend to draw a moral ‘line in the sand’, incorporating RV can facilitate ethical discussion as part of decision-making and conflict resolution. The alternative – allowing only instrumental values (and perhaps intrinsic values) ‘at the table’ – can result in divisive and unproductive stalemates (e.g., jobs vs. environment; Satterfield and Levin, 2007; Chapman et al., 2020; Raymond et al. 2023).

## **Spash-inspired suggestions for relational values research**

We build on the critiques above and the potential of RV to address those critiques to offer suggestions for future research related to RV. We suggest that RV research will best position itself to inform transformative change if it aims to: 1) acknowledge normativity in all RV research, 2) build coherence within a pluralistic space and 3) be intentional regarding institutions’ role in RV research and related decision-making.

In addition to the three topical areas below, we highlight two practices that undergird our other suggestions: reflexivity and transparency. By reflexivity, we mean intentional, recursive reflection on the many aspects and implications of the research process – for example, motivations for the research, reasons for choices of methods and study sites, research outcomes and the role of researchers’ identities in shaping the research and its results. In this, we follow work in sustainability science that emphasises the importance of reflexivity (e.g., Spangenberg, 2011; Miller, 2013), as well as the long tradition of reflexivity across the qualitative social sciences. Yet reflexivity alone is not sufficient; it must be linked to transparent communication about the aspects reflected upon. If transparency about reflexivity becomes more normalised, it will help to develop a research community that is collectively aware and jointly reflexive.

### ***Acknowledge normativity in RV research***

Spash’s critiques illuminate how monetary valuation smuggles a problematic utilitarian morality into public policy. We showed above how RV thinking can take a different tack: one that highlights the value of relationships and attends to marginalised perspectives. Spash’s critiques offer another important lesson: that complete intellectual honesty and thoroughness requires acknowledging the normative bases that underlie research – especially value-related research. If RV are to develop environmental valuation in respectful, holistic and just ways, the underlying normativity of any RV research must be considered and made explicit.

We encourage RV researchers to critically and explicitly consider the normative aspects of their work, and to be transparent about any normative assumptions they detect. Because research is always embedded in society, even the *description* of people’s values is not value-free. As ‘Critiques of environmental valuation’ section demonstrates, monetary valuation reifies certain assumptions about preferences, substitutability, individualism, etc. Spash has done much to excavate, expose and contest these assumptions’ normative dimensions; that clarity allows us to deliberate about what assumptions

we would rather use as a basis for informing decisions. Above, we suggest that RV provide a way to address the limitations of monetary valuation, but it is important to acknowledge that RV research, like all research, involves assumptions that are not value-neutral. Therefore, an important direction for RV scholarship is to diagnose and reflect on how RV scholarship involves normative judgements, even (and perhaps especially) implicit ones – and then how and why these normative judgements play out in theoretical and empirical research design. Though this is relevant for all research, it is particularly necessary for research focused on values. Here, we identify a suite of normative considerations that RV research should address if the field is to equitably inform decision-making with the reflexivity that market valuation lacks. These normative considerations fall into four categories: value selection, representation, aggregation and normative justification (Figure 1).

**Value selection.** Any portrayal of multiple values of nature confronts questions of which values to study. RV research has focused on values associated with relationships that are desirable from a sustainability perspective, even though conceptually RV also refer to relationships that degrade ecosystems (Hoelle et al., 2022; Lliso et al., 2022). RV that centre on eudaimonia (good life intended as fulfilment and flourishing; Chan et al., 2018; Knippenberg et al., 2018) provide a prominent example: depending on how (and by whom) the good life is defined, the RV that research considers might change. We suggest RV researchers more directly and explicitly engage in ethical reflection on their intentions and assumptions as related to sustainability. (The necessity of engaging with ethical reflection on sustainability is also true of intrinsic and instrumental values, as no value type is per se pro- or anti-sustainability – though many authors often implicitly assume that intrinsic values support sustainability.) Crucially, not only researchers should engage in this ethical inquiry; open and public deliberation can offer a platform to engage with ethical questions about sustainability – including what sustainability is and looks like – in accessible ways (Spash, 2013).

**Representation.** Questions of representation that are fundamental to most social science research (e.g., who is included, and how can a researcher represent others' views?; see Figure 2) are no less relevant to RV research. RV researchers tend to understand

- | <b>Normative considerations for RV research</b>  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Selection:</b> Should only 'desirable' RV be studied? What does desirable mean (e.g. desirable for whom)? In empirical surveys, how are RV chosen and defined?</li> <li>● <b>Representation:</b> Whose RV matter? Who should speak for RV in decision-making settings? When are researchers' accounts of RV sufficient?</li> <li>● <b>Aggregation:</b> Can the ubiquity of experience of RV be described, and how? How should one person's RV be treated in comparison to another's: should individuals' RV be aggregated, and how? How should different RV be weighted in decision-making?</li> <li>● <b>Normative justification:</b> Do RV provide moral and ethical justifications to protect nature? (How) do these justifications differ from those provided by intrinsic and instrumental values?</li> </ul> |

**Figure 1.** Suggested normative considerations researchers engaged in investigating RV.



status of RV in relation to intrinsic and instrumental values, and in relation to sustainability and the protection of nature.

### *Build common ground in RV research (avoiding a theoretical cacophony)*

It has been suggested that values scholars should ‘love the mess’ that comes with a pluralistic field, rather than aim to discipline its concepts, methods or purpose around a coherent core (Kenter et al., 2019). Disciplines such as geography acknowledge that defining the ‘canon’ of a field is a political act that inevitably shores up power and restricts ideas of what a discipline (or its practitioners) should think, look like or become (Rosenman et al., 2020; Castree et al., 2022). Notwithstanding these challenges of fostering coherence in a scholarly field, however, Spash argues that benefits of coherence are considerable, and we agree that these merit further exploration.

Speaking to environmental valuation, Spash suggests that the field should aspire to some type of coherence so that knowledge can advance, problems can be addressed and debunked assumptions can be discarded. In writing about ecological economics (Spash, 2011a, 2020), Spash bemoaned that pluralism provides cover for the widely disproven assumptions of market based valuation to be endlessly revived, represented and circulated as if they constitute just another ‘perspective’ as valid as any other perspective in the field. If the goal is to advance understanding, pluralism cannot mean ‘anything goes’. Some common ground is needed to compare, synthesise and integrate different approaches.

We suggest that researchers consider how their work can contribute to a harmonious polyphony of interconnected ideas, rather than a cacophony. This requires scholars to be reflexive and transparent in how they use theoretical or conceptual literature. Although we do not desire a *single* theory, we think the – still rather heterogeneous – field of RV research would benefit from more thorough conceptual systematisation. Systematisation would require not only explicitly articulating differences and identifying commonalities across scholarship traditions (both conceptually and methodologically; Himes et al., 2023) but also engaging critically with evidence that challenges (or possibly falsifies) concepts or theories. Since RV researchers are often motivated to help move towards transformative change, we need to build a shared evidence base and cumulative conceptual repertoire that RV practitioners and advocates can draw upon in their situated struggles for environmental justice across the globe. Rather than building upon a single canon with the typical (white, Euro-American-centric) biases, a common ground can be framed as a polyphony (Tsing, 2015), in which different voices contribute to an ensemble that encourages harmony and avoids cacophonies.

We share Spash’s concern about an ‘anything goes’ pluralism, where theories (and embedded assumptions) exist parallel to one another in reciprocal indifference and never cross-fertilise. Instead, perhaps RV research could aspire towards a pluralism rooted in reciprocal learning, critical engagement with diverse approaches and a commitment to build shared knowledge. Importantly, this might imply discarding assumptions or frameworks that are untenable, falsified or problematic in crucial ways, rather than continuously recycling them in extended zombie afterlives (i.e., dead but still walking around causing problems; Monbiot, 2016; Spash, 2020).

What might a polyphonic pluralism look like? We admit that this topic warrants at least its own paper, if not its own book. However, building on the ideas above, along with a few recent papers that suggest paths forward for pluralistic research (e.g., Tengö et al., 2017), we consider three characteristics as useful starting points for pursuing a polyphonic pluralism.

1. *Harmonisation of concepts and respectful critique.* We want RV evidence and the insights generated from the field to be additive and cumulative, so that they can acquire force in policy and environmental politics. To foster coherence in a polyphony, RV scholars should explicitly locate concepts they use within families of similar concepts (especially within the RV literature) (Himes et al., 2023) and explain how any newly introduced concepts differ in specific and operational terms. This could include, for example, using existing definitions or clearly identifying why a definition should be modified. One potential starting point and source of common understanding is the IPBES values typology (IPBES, 2022; Pascual et al., 2023; Raymond et al. 2023). Though imperfect, this provides a comprehensive framework of environmental values that has been created and informed by diverse disciplinary perspectives and geographical experience. We suggest that IPBES' work and the trio of characteristics in Table 1 can help researchers to build collective knowledge that aims at generating cumulative rather than multiplicative insights. When RV researchers depart from the IPBES framework and characteristics identified here, we suggest that explicit critique, which explains why these frameworks are insufficient and how alternatives improve upon them, would help the RV field be cumulative. A harmonious polyphonic pluralism, in sum, exhibits diversity but operates from a shared foundation. This may support RV research to move beyond academia to impact decision-making, as non-academics are unlikely to have patience for completely different understandings of RV in every context.
2. *Intentional engagement with difference.* An 'anything goes' attitude in which all perspectives are considered legitimate can miss the opportunity to foster crucial debate about meaningful conceptual tensions and divergent positions. In contrast, polyphonic plurality commits to engaging with and exploring the tension caused by difference. The goal is not necessarily to resolve differences but to be intentional about grasping their nuances and relationships. The polyphony metaphor implies that a rich soundscape of differences can coexist – not merely exist beside one another in parallel, but interjected into one another to produce an emergent ensemble. The polyphony can host a rich variety of voices that are not reducible to one another but are also not incompatible.
3. *Triangulation of ideas across methods.* This point relates to research methods and findings, rather than (as above) to frameworks and definitions. In a polyphony, researchers would refer to others' findings and methods to explore how the use of various methods enriches understanding. Empirical studies would explore, in some detail, how their findings compare to others, and how methods, context and other factors may explain those differences.

### *Be intentional in interaction with decision-making institutions*

Studies of cultural ecosystem services (a field closely aligned with relational values) frequently claim that results will be relevant to decision-making – yet that claim is rarely bolstered by evidence (Gould et al., 2019a). The same trend seems present in RV research; researchers are motivated to inform policy and often claim that their work may inform it, but the details of interactions with decision-making are left murky, often unattended to (or perhaps not published; Gould et al., 2019a). We suggest that the time has come to be more intentional about how this burgeoning bouquet of RV research interfaces with decision-making. We suggest a heuristic spectrum of intended engagement with decision-making, with three waypoints (Figure 2). All points along with the spectrum are helpful; though we suggest that more engagement with decision-making would be fruitful, not all RV researchers need to interface directly with decision-making. For those who do not make institutional concerns integral to their research, we suggest honest and transparent assessment of where they are on the spectrum.

According to linear accounts of science-policy connections, researchers produce information that policymakers then use to make decisions. This linear model is often associated with technocratic approaches (Turnhout et al. 2019). Some (arguably much) valuation research conceptualises science-policy connections in this way. Similar to environmental valuation scholarship more generally (McKenzie et al., 2014), RV scholarship has sometimes satisfied itself with the idea that deciding how to adjudicate between competing values is ‘someone else’s (specifically, decision-makers’) problem’. In some cases, this assumption may hold true. But in aggregate, this adjudication-is-in-decisionmakers-hands approach leaves unacknowledged and under-analysed the ways in which our current decision-making structures permit and use information. We consider this problematic because there is little point in describing RV of, for example, a marine environment if court processes only permit biophysical information linked to narrow legislative categories (see Tadaki et al., 2021).

We suggest that RV research can do more than merely substitute new descriptions of value within the existing technocratic frame of decision-making. Exploring institutional change is a natural fit for RV research, because many RV cannot be easily condensed into comparable numbers and thus fit less well with technocratic management. Accordingly, sharing information about RV with decision-makers, both in more traditional information-provider approaches and through increasingly called-for deliberative and participatory approaches (Raymond et al., 2014), may serve to change the way decisions are made, not just the kind of information that is informing them.

A fundamental problem with monetary valuation is that it measures the *intensity* of preferences but not the *reasons* for them (O’Neill and Spash, 2000). RV can clearly help to understand the different reasons people have for their preferences. But the question then shifts to one of decision-making: how should society make decisions, having been presented with a plurality of *reasons*? Spash argues that this is where we need to head, but stops short of showing how we might get there. RV research should investigate options and engage with their power-laden dimensions so that RV scholars can contribute to the design of institutions for decision-making – including creative, novel forms of institutions that may not exist yet, returns to historically effective institutions and

combinations. Deliberative approaches will likely play an important role here; we agree with Spash's call for 'development of deliberative institutions that allow citizens to form preferences through reasoned dialogue, rather than institutions for aggregating given preferences to arrive at an 'optimal' outcome' (O'Neill and Spash, 2000, 530). Recent environmental values work has made a start, looking at different styles of deliberative approaches to value elicitation and their limitations (Raymond et al., 2014; Kenter et al., 2016). Yet deliberative approaches are not the only option, and RV researchers should get creative about what other institutional approaches might effectively bring RV into decision-making spaces. This idea of working to develop new institutions aligns with a co-production approach; co-production recognises the 'entwinement of knowledge and action', which means 'that the outcomes of co-productive processes go beyond what is traditionally understood as knowledge in a formal sense' (Maas et al., 2022, 4). We suggest that dynamic new institutions are a potential 'beyond knowledge' outcome.

How might dynamic new institutions advance and build on RV research? We see manifold opportunities here, but as a start suggest two characteristics for new institutions. First, new institutions would provide a forum to discuss values that are often crucial and deeply important, but that are very difficult to articulate and summarise. Spash calls for this type of forum repeatedly – he emphasises that this type of deliberative context is a powerful alternative to monetary valuation. Second, new institutions would provide a mechanism for decision-makers and researchers, and ideally different segments of the public, to interact to identify what data collection or value elicitation processes might be helpful. This is the core of co-production: that research design comes not from researchers alone, but from a partnership between researchers, decision-makers and society more generally (Boswell and Smith, 2017; Miller and Wyborn, 2020).

### *Suggested research questions*

We conclude with a few examples of possible research questions for future RV research. We organise these questions into our three suggested research directions (see Table 2). Our aim with these questions is to spark specific ideas about how to operationalise our suggestions above; they are far from exhaustive, as many research approaches that build on our suggestions could also find inspiration in Spash's work. To explore the question about the normative assumptions of different permutations of RV, for instance, researchers could follow Spash's model of analysing and clearly articulating normative assumptions of mainstream economics to articulate normative assumptions of psychological, valuation and philosophical permutations of the RV concept (Stålhammar and Thorén, 2019). To understand the implications of different methods used to study RV, researchers could conduct a quasi-experiment: they could study RV in a given context using at least two methods, as Spash did with contingent valuation and deliberative methods. They could then compare outcomes from each method. To construct metrics that characterise RV without flattening them,<sup>5</sup> researchers could build on Spash's repeated calls for deliberation by developing deliberative processes for creating constructed metrics (building, for instance, on previous related work, e.g., Satterfield et al., 2013).



**Table 2.** Possible research questions for RV research.**Questions about normativity**

What normative assumptions underlie the different permutations of the RV concept?

What are relational values that are not supportive of sustainability? Do these types of relational values exhibit any systematic or common differences from RV that support sustainability?

**Questions about building common ground**

As scholars globally produce more empirical work documenting RV in various contexts, how do we integrate across these diverse studies? How do we bring them together to move forward towards transformative change?

How can we integrate and move forward collectively in the study of RV while remaining respectful of diverse knowledge systems, rather than reproducing colonial generalisations?

What are the implications (e.g., for practice; for the types of values expressed; for different communities) of choosing particular methods to study RV? How should results from different study methods be compared and synthesised?

**Questions related to decision-making institutions**

What, if any, impact does characterising RV have on decision making and policy?

Is there empirical evidence for the claim that discussing RV helps to manage conflict? If so, how does this work; what processes or interactions are at play?

Do RV support existing schemes of co-governance? If so, which ones? If not, what does form the basis?

How can we construct metrics that 'measure' the impacts of different policies/changes on RV without 'flattening' RV?

**Conclusions**

We have explored some of the main critiques of economic valuation, as articulated by Spash, and discuss how RV research and practice may address them. RV research has been significantly influenced by Spash's critical contributions, so it is no coincidence that it moves in a similar direction. We contend that RV research builds on Spash's core suggestion of the need for environmental valuation that encompasses a broader array of values than monetary valuation can accommodate. Our suggestions for RV research can contribute to the potential of RV to advance environmental valuation in equitable ways.

The science-policy connections literature offers an important reminder for RV research not to expect dramatic policy impact from individual studies. Instead, 'research impact involves subtle, incremental and diffuse ideational adjustments over a long period of time, which are generated by a wide range of research insights rather than specific individual findings' (Boswell and Smith, 2017, 8). What is likely to have impact are 'collaborative endeavours that build incrementally on a wider body of work; that develop longer-term relationships with a range of non-academic audiences (not only policymakers and other 'elites'); and that may bring out subtle conceptual shifts, rather than clearly identifiable policy changes' (Boswell and Smith, 2017, 8). RV certainly lend themselves to conceptual shifts and ideational adjustments. We encourage the RV community to keep in mind that these shifts may take time, and to continue the collaborative, incremental work that may eventually lead to transformative change.

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## Notes

1. Utilitarianism is a rich and complex moral philosophy that is greatly simplified in Spash's analysis. Moral utilitarianism extends to all sentient beings, and versions of it are compatible with deontological considerations. However, Spash focuses mostly on the reductive and restricted interpretation of utility in mainstream economics, which is indeed limited to human beings and which models human choices (preferences) according to the assumption that individuals always and exclusively seek to maximise their own utility. Here, we understand utilitarianism in this latter sense in line with Spash's usage.
2. Any positive discount rate implies that welfare of future generations is valued at a marginally lower rate than that of those currently alive. The debate in climate economics between William Nordhaus and Nicholas Stern about the 'correct' discount rate illustrates how different ethical assumptions about the value of future generations can lead to very different policy recommendations. Spash's criticism of discounting remains highly relevant since it has since been pointed out that the selection of discount rates is arbitrary and cannot be justified by economic theory. See Pindyck (2017).
3. While the understanding of instrumental values is more or less consensual (value of something as a means to an external end), the term intrinsic value has been used in different ways in the literature, spanning from the moral standing of other-than-human beings, to objective values (independent of humans as valuers), or as attribution of value to something in its own right (as in love; McShane, 2007). Defining it in terms of 'regardless of reference to people' tries to synthesise all these meanings (Anderson et al., 2022).
4. Weak anthropocentrism was proposed *inter alia* by Hargrove (1992) albeit with reference to subjective intrinsic values.
5. When people attempt to simplify complex, multidimensional values into a more simplified metric, it is the equivalent of flattening a three-dimensional sculpture into a two-dimensional outline: in this flattening, much information is lost. One promising goal of RV research could be to characterise those values without 'flattening' them.
6. We refer here to substitutability in principle because there may be cases where in practice no viable alternative exists.

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