

John Foster

Beyond Costs and Benefits: Weighing Environmental Goods

Abstract: A teleological approach to deciding how we should act underlies the attempted extension of neo-classical economics to environmental issues, with its emphasis on comparative valuation in monetary terms. Such an extension fails because, in the environmental sphere, there are powerful reasons for denying commensurability of the relevant values. But this denial then tends to undercut *any* weighing of environmental goods. In response to this difficulty, the paper seeks to develop an account of the weighing of goods which would enable us to recognise value as a human creation, while also grounding it in an ecological unity with the wider life of nature.

I.

In this paper I want to consider the nature and limits of economistic thinking about the environment. I shall not, however, have much to say directly concerning environmental economics, nor indeed economics more generally. What I mean by 'economistic thinking' is a certain way of approaching questions of value. This is an approach which answers to something very important in the idea of value itself; it also, I think, grounds any claims which economics might have to avail us in dealing with matters of our wider-than-material well-being. I believe that there are difficulties with it which become unignorably prominent in the environmental context; confronting these difficulties has implications both for our day-to-day evaluative engagement with environmental issues, and also for our sense, at fundamental levels, of what environmentalism is *about*. It may, further, have implications for our understanding of value more generally.

Ethical claims such as:

(1) We should, all things considered, prevent the further extinction of species form a central part of the environmentalist case.

The way of thinking with which I am concerned is that which takes such a claim as equivalent to:

(2) The *benefits* of preventing further extinctions *outweigh* those of not doing so.

A more generalised form of this way of putting it would be to say that the benefits *outweigh the costs*. This view of the structure of ethical claims will, I hope, be recognisable as that informing John Broome's book *Weighing Goods* (Broome 1991). Indeed, Broome's recourse to economic methods to explicate this

structure, and in particular his justification of the entailed 'betterness ordering' in terms of the structure of the preference relation in rational agents, greatly encourage me to apply the label 'economistic' to this way of seeing things. But even without such authority one might readily concede the aptness of the term. For what we have here is the essence of *meliorist* thinking – the basic idea that our motivation for action arises from, or arises *as*, our impulse to maximise perceived goods; that to want the good is necessarily to prefer the better. The kinship between this meliorism and economics, conceived as the art of shaping choice among limited resources to maximise well-being, is both clear and close.

It can seem irresistible to take our belief that, for example, we should prevent the further extinguishing of species, in such a melioristic or economistic sense. Irresistible – and yet, of course, at the same time deeply suspect. It is a matter of observation that environmentalists' doubts about this way of taking so central a tenet can never quite be stilled, even while they argue forcefully for it in the language of comparative benefit. Here is a fairly critical paradox of modern environmentalist thought. In this paper I shall be trying to justify both the irresistibility *and* the suspicion, and seeking ultimately to reconcile them.

II.

Some clarification of terms is necessary at this point.

Firstly, the term 'benefit', despite its prudential ring, carries as used here no necessary implication that such claims as (2) are reducible to expressions of *self-interest* – whether the self-interest of an individual, a society or even the human species. We might equally have said (and Broome in effect does say) that the *good* involved in or associated with preventing further extinctions outweighs that involved in or associated with the alternative, or that the good associated with that option outweighs the bad – or equally, that our various obligations are better met that way. Nor need the good in question be thought of as *somebody's* good, in the sense of serving somebody's interest; necessarily it will be perceived from someone's *perspective*, but that is a different matter.¹ It could perfectly well be a general, impersonal good such as we all – or at least, many of us – disinterestedly acknowledge in the preservation of things like species, things which cannot (*pace* much strained 'ecocentric' argumentation) themselves have interests.

Of course, many of the concerns which lead us to make such claims as (2) will indeed – and perfectly properly – be self-interested. We want to maintain credit in the gene bank, we want to avoid blundering into ecosystem catastrophe through the ignorant destruction of keystone species, we want to go on enjoying a world delightful with dolphins and abounding in koala bears. But there can be room on the conception which I am considering for an admixture of other kinds of concern, of the sort which environmental economics tries to capture with the notion of 'existence value' – concern for species as *in themselves* or *intrinsically* worth

¹ I owe my appreciation of the force of this distinction to my Lancaster colleague Alan Holland.

saving. Indeed, there must be room for these concerns: for it is surely clear that to take such claims as expressing only interested motivations is to denature them.

Secondly, I choose with some care the phrase "good (or benefit) *involved in or associated with*" the preferred option. This is in order to avoid the suggestion that such benefits must be consequences (distinguishable results or products of) the option. I am concerned with an interpretation of "we should ..." answering to Broome's sense of *teleological* as distinct from *consequentialist*: an interpretation according to which the comparative rightness of acts is determined by their goodness, and their goodness has the particular structure implied in the idea of 'weighing goods'. Aspects of the relevant goodness or benefit – such as the goodness of promise-keeping aside from the results – can on this picture belong (again) *intrinsically* to the acts under consideration.

Finally, I do not take such statements about the comparative weight of benefit as, typically, purporting to give the result of a calculation; but rather, as offering to convey and report a judgement. The evaluative claim that the benefits of doing A outweigh the costs is not normally a claim of the form: "The benefits sum to x , the costs to y , therefore ..." Instead, it constitutes, as it were, a single interpretive move by which the various relevant aspects confronting us are brought into a unitary motivating relation. These aspects we realise to ourselves, as we weigh and consider, not quantitatively but in terms of a very wide-ranging normative-descriptive vocabulary – to do A would (say) be *decent* and *honourable*, but would have consequences B and C which would be respectively *uncomfortable* and *anti-social*, while a good many people would take it as implying D which would seem *pretentious* ... and so on. All these terms carry for us their distinctive vibrations of pleasure and distaste, appeal and recoil, requirement and prohibition. Needing to act, or not, on the basis of what we take A to involve, we resolve all these various essentially qualitative perceptions together into a single pattern of *these outweighing those* – but with no *deduction* involved at any stage.

Accordingly, I am not going to spend much time on the argument that *cost-benefit analysis* (CBA) is the proper framework for addressing such evaluative issues. I believe the untenability of that position not only to follow plainly from the above account, but to have been demonstrated convincingly enough in the literature – for instance by John O'Neill (O'Neill 1993). An important part of what I *am* interested in, however, is how far a sufficiently robust rejection of CBA is liable to compromise the basic idea that ethical judgement involves the weighing of different goods, different significances and values, against one another.

III.

Neo-classical economics, from which CBA derives, offers a representation of how we bring our values to bear on individual and collective decisions. This representation is set within the framework of a particular model of human behaviour, one which is deeply characteristic of our kind of society – the model of the individual as consumer, his basically self-interested rational choice directed upon the impli-

cations of his actions for his own well-being. The criterion of value here is what people are willing to pay for some 'good' – what they are prepared to give up to acquire or defend it. What I am willing, at the margin, to pay for a good and the strength of my preference for it are not, on this model, distinct from one another, nor from the value which I place on it; and the value of the good to people in general is similarly not distinct from its market price, which is thus an apparently objective index of value in monetary terms. The neo-classical extension of this model to environmental issues proceeds through treating desired features of the environment like clean air, unpolluted water, open spaces or climatic stability as if they were goods in this sense, and environmental harms as externalities – damage or disbenefit collateral to economic activity. These goods and harms are, in principle anyway, things in regard to which we have or could form preferences, and thus susceptible of having an economic value placed on them. Actual or notional values for these various benefits and costs are, according to the mainstream neo-classical model, to be derived on the basis of preferences revealed in real or hypothetical markets. Conclusions about what course of development might be in our best interests can then be informed by a recognition of how these costs and benefits in the environmental sphere balance up.²

The economist's concept of choice between differently-valued options as a *process of maximisation*, with its condition of *value-commensurability*, constitutes a powerful and pervasive interpretation of how we proceed rationally in making such judgements. Bernard Williams calls this the "rationalistic conception of rationality":

"an assumption ... to the effect that two considerations cannot be weighed against each other unless there is a common consideration in terms of which they can be compared." (Williams 1985, 18)

It is clear that any balancing up of quantified costs and benefits depends on such a conception. But there are major problems with this picture of value-commensurability as applied to important environmental choices.

The commensurability, or otherwise, of values will figure quite prominently in what follows, so I had better make clear at this point what I am taking the term to mean. Williams' remark just quoted encapsulates the basic idea: two entities are commensurable if there exists a common measure by which to compare them. As regards the extension of this idea to the domain of value, O'Neill's development of the thought is apposite:

"In evaluative appraisal of objects, value commensurability entails that there is a 'measure' of value in terms of which one can uniquely rank the objects evaluated. Commensurability can, however, take strong or weak forms, depending on whether one takes the measure to have a cardinal interpretation, or merely an ordinal one." (O'Neill 1993, 103)

² The classic statement of this approach, at least in the UK context, is to be found in Pearce et al. 1989 (originally a report commissioned by the UK Department of the Environment).

That is, two values A and B are strongly commensurable if it makes sense to say that, unless they are equal, one is greater than the other, *and* it also makes sense to say *by how much* the one is greater than the other; they are weakly commensurable where the former but not the latter condition holds.³ Incommensurability of values can therefore be taken for present purposes to mean one of two things: the failure either of strong or of weak commensurability in these senses.

Now intuitively, the incommensurability of major values seems a very characteristic feature of environmental contexts; and this reflects a recognition of the multiple and intricate relations which we humans have with our 'environment' within the whole web of life. The natural world constitutes the arena for all our modes of being, and the various kinds of concern which humans experience towards it and its particular features appear to be radically and vitally diverse. Thus, our concerns reflect, for instance, a consciousness of our animal nature and a sympathetic identification with other life-forms, a recognition of the natural world as provider of resources for the business of surviving and prospering, and also the emotional, aesthetic and broadly 'cultural' attachments which we have to particular aspects of that natural world. There is a deep and evident implausibility about supposing that values subtended by such very different orders of concern should be either mutually inter-reducible, or measurable against any single scale such as degree of preference-satisfaction – that, for instance, the value we place on some given location as a landscape, a habitat, a manifestation of wilderness, or a potential resource should be susceptible to treatment in this way.

So far, these considerations work only in favour of value-pluralism and against the strong conception of commensurability; they indicate that there is no super-value or single scale yielding a cardinal ordering of environmental values. It is not, as it were, the superglue of some supervalue which keeps the living integrity of the world intact – it is just the unity-in-diversity that there actually happens to go on being. In this rejection of monism, of course, our thoughts coincide with the thrust of much recent argument about value in general (see for instance Raz 1986); similar points have been made in respect of, for example, the various distinguishable goods (autonomy, pleasure, achievement and so forth) contributing to a valuable human life. It is certainly not obvious that the values of these, either, are reducible to the terms of any single scale. Maybe, too, the justification for such a doubt should parallel that to which I have appealed in the environmental case – the radical diversity of our internal ecology, our different relations to different aspects of our conscious being.

Now the application of monetary values to environmental goods – the basis of CBA – is the attempt to rank them on just such a single scale. If values do not

³ O'Neill also distinguishes between weak commensurability and *weak comparability* – where neither condition necessarily holds, but one can still choose rationally between objects embodying values A and B. That is, one can rationally choose A over B in a given context without committing oneself to the belief that it makes sense in that context to say that A is better than B. I shall not discuss this formulation directly in what follows, and indeed what I say below about trading off implicitly contradicts it. Nevertheless I think the whole paper is an attempt to make sense in my own terms of O'Neill's idea.

have the right characteristics for strong commensurability, this attempt must fail properly to represent the dynamics of choice guided by values.

The environmental case against value-commensurability, however, has an important further dimension. It involves the acknowledgement, not just that key environmental goods are impossible for us to measure against one another in that monistic way, but that, as it were, they need to be seen as ultimately eluding our measurement altogether. For if we, from our inevitably human perspective, could indeed impose any overall ordering on environmental value, it would surely be in the spirit of the old adage, 'Man is the measure of all things' – implying, not necessarily that all things are to be regarded as important only in relation to his needs, but that his conceptual capacities naturally extend to *getting the measure* of all things in the world which he encounters. But the new growth of environmental and ecological consciousness represents, in part, precisely the discrediting of that long-dominant view of ourselves and our relation to the world. It represents a recognition not only that we are ultimately not in charge, nor even equipped to be in charge – but that there is no occupiable position from which to *take* charge.

The point might be put like this. The very idea of value – the melioristic core of the concept, and what grounds the weighing and ordering of goods – is of something *the more of which the better*. This is not, of course, to imply that if something, say the rabbit population, has value, then the more *rabbits* the better; rather, if anything has value, it shares with whatever else has value something of which it may be said in general that the more the better. Commensurability in its weak interpretation just follows, for talk of *more value* in general can only make sense if particular values or kinds of value can in principle be brought into an overall ordering of magnitude. But of nothing in the external natural world to which we belong can it be said, *simpliciter*, that the more of it the better; as with the rabbits, "different optima for different situations" is the name of the whole ecological game.⁴

This rejection of anthropocentric evaluative hubris is, I think, a very powerful component of environmental-ethical thinking – and rightly so. But we can see its subversive force in regard to commensurability. It carries the argument from natural diversity beyond the point of mere value-pluralism, and generates a presumption against the availability of any well-grounded 'ordering' at all, from our species-limited perspective, of key environmental goods in terms of their value. That is, it generates a presumption against what I have called the economic or melioristic interpretation of environmental imperatives.

Other ways of seeing these imperatives have of course been widely canvassed in environmental ethics – from intrinsically infeasible natural rights to holistic ecological consciousness. I must confess to being profoundly sceptical about all of these, and indeed about any approach to environment not founded in our human practice of rational judgement about relative priorities. If this practice – corresponding to what I have called economic thinking based on weak commen-

⁴ I think this point is really the same as John Mackie's "argument from queerness" in Mackie 1977, Part 1, section 9 especially.

surability – is significantly compromised, any prospect of a rational environmental policy for a modern society looks, suddenly, terribly remote. For one certainty about any such policy is that it would have to turn on the central role of the *negotiated trade-off* – the agreement, capable of being generalised across society as a whole, that since there are limits and we cannot have as much as we want of both A and B, so much of A is worth giving up in order to have so much more of B. No such conclusion is defensible in a complex and highly differentiated society without recourse to well-grounded general agreement about comparative values – the sort of collective agreement that, situation by situation, *this is more valuable than that*, which environmental CBA, for all its manifest deficiencies, has at least been trying to establish as the basis of rational policy. And if our kind of society can't make coherent and comprehensive environmental policy, the future is surely very bleak indeed.

But what does saving weak commensurability while respecting concerns about evaluative hubris actually entail? I want to argue that we can preserve enough of the 'weighing' approach to environmental goods for practical policy purposes, and also meet the spirit of objections from environmentalists – indeed, from 'deep ecologists' – to human managerialism. I believe that we can only do so, however, by way of some considerations about human creativity which may be disturbing to both camps.

IV.

Let us look more closely at what is involved in making judgements between options embodying apparently incommensurable values. What follows will seem to move away from 'environment' – I have deliberately chosen, or rather borrowed, a non-environmental main example – but will, I hope, return to it refreshed.

Consider Broome's example of a decision to be made between a social policy productive of affluence at the expense of communal harmony, and one productive of the reverse. He takes this as the kind of case where we might want to conclude that the benefits of these policies cannot be weighed against each other:

"You might think that neither policy is definitely better than the other, but that they are not equally good either. If they were equally good you would be indifferent about which was chosen, but actually you think it matters very much. Your view is teleological. It takes the ethical considerations to be the good or bad features of the alternative policies: affluence is good and so is harmony. But it supposes that some sorts of good cannot be weighed against others." (Broome 1991, 7)

And despite the apparent authorial distancing, he does actually conclude on the next page that "goods that cannot be weighed against each other seem a genuine possibility".

One source of the *appearance* of difficulty in weighing is evident from the way Broome puts things here; it depends on the abstract manner in which such cases are typically represented for theoretical discussion. The policy options, we say for

the sake of brevity, would produce either greater affluence or greater harmony; 'affluence is good and so is harmony'; and faced, indeed, with the prospect of weighing up the respective importance of affluence and harmony *in the abstract*, we should be perfectly entitled to feel non-plussed. Such a comparison just seems beside the point. These terms describe kinds of general good rooted in distinctly different general modes of desire and understanding – the experience of personal comfort and security, the experience of fraternity – each of which has an equally legitimate claim to be comprehended within the general idea of the good for man. What more, at this level, is there to be said?

But in the actuality of the supposed case it will not, of course, be *affluence* and *harmony* just as such which we are called on to consider. Instead, we shall be addressing ourselves to a whole range of specific social and personal aspects of the alternative policy options, and moving towards an overall judgement in terms of how far these aspects strike us favourably or unfavourably. Crucially, this overall judgement will tend to be based not only on reflection, but on appropriate consultation and discussion, and will involve the subsidiary assessment of the views of others thus elicited. In such a process, real issues will always tend to present themselves with a perceptible charge of significance, positive or negative; the prospects of (say) so many more out-of-town supermarkets as against so much less street crime, or of a decent statutory minimum wage as against so many more industrial disputes, will engage to different degrees with our real private and shared concerns, where more general ethical considerations by themselves would tend to remain hanging in the air. Such general considerations properly come in as we try to organise our particular responses into an overview – something we must do in any actual judgement if the plethora of different potential implications of alternative options is not to become unsurveyable. But our assessment is always given its substance by the question what we are to do *here*, in this particular context of instances, with these generalisable value-terms.

'Weighing up the options' does indeed still seem an irresistible way of imaging this kind of exercise of our practical judgement – although the concepts being valued can remain, at whatever level, incommensurable taken in themselves. The value of reduced crime, or of the consequent increase in personal well-being, is not something which could *just as such* be expressed in terms in which the value of increased commercial opportunities could also be expressed, and only the blurring effect of a post-utilitarian hangover could make us suppose otherwise. These things cannot in themselves be reliably ordered in any relation of better or worse – as we say, 'it all depends'. The point is that in practice we never do consider them just in themselves, but as part of specific living conjunctures at which we come to agreement about what comparative weight they are, here and here and here, to be *given*.

This is typical, I think, of all genuine value-judgement as between competing goods. And the wholly characteristic process of moving back and forth consideringly between the general value-terms and the specific instances contributes powerfully to that sense of dynamic tension which metaphors of "weighing" and "balancing" offer to capture.

Here, I think, we have an important hint as to how the insistent metaphor of "weighing" is really to be taken. In 'weighing up the benefits' of alternative options we do not register the different weights these aspects possess; rather, we *weight* some aspects positively, others negatively, and some more heavily than others. We *weigh* considerations, not as we *measure* lengths but as we *stress* various points in an exposition – a process of actively constituting what is 'there'. Another way of putting this point would be to say that in value-judgement, as distinct from judgement about matters of fact, the commensurability of the objects of judgement seems to be grounded in our capacity to weigh them comparatively against one another, rather than the other way about. We can make intelligible comparative judgements regarding properties like heaviness or strength of character because, basically, such properties exist in different degrees among the objects which instantiate them. But for genuine value-properties – and perhaps this is a criterion for them? – they exist (*not* 'seem to exist') in different degrees because we can make intelligible comparative judgements regarding the objects instantiating them.

We can now see more clearly the two problems which the idea of 'weighing incommensurables' brings to a focus. Firstly: when we have judged, I want to say that we have *given* the different options their comparative weights, in terms of the differential significances which we have accorded to their associated costs and benefits; and that is to say that we have made them, *pro tanto*, commensurate – not in substantive terms of some mythical common currency like preference-satisfaction, but formally by bringing the aspects of them which strike us within this intuitively irresistible interpretive framework. But how, if they are not in themselves commensurable, can this be anything but an undetermined and quite open-ended procedure? And how, if it is that, can it be rational?

And how, secondly, can we avoid the charge of anthropocentric hubris which forces itself on our attention when we bring these reflections about value-judgement back into the environmental context? The idea of our evaluative perspective's being somehow necessarily adequate to ordering the vital multifariousness of nature seemed presumptuous. The idea of our not just recognising but *constituting* the ordered key values which inform our participation in the natural world – the values of different species, of wild places, of complex ecosystems – seems even more irretrievably hubristic.

I shall argue in what follows that the resolutions of these two difficulties are closely interconnected.

V.

If what I have suggested above about the nature of our assessment of costs and benefits is correct, it means this: the consideration ('weighing') which issues in value-judgement *creates* the value-ordering which justifies it. We make values commensurate in judging how costs and benefits balance, and the comparative weight which they thereby acquire is what warrants our judgement – and of course

any decisions and other practical implications flowing from that judgement. Note that I am not here talking in psychological mode of the *perceived* balance of benefits being *taken* to warrant our judgement. That something is taken (however widely) to warrant a judgement cannot itself count as warranting the judgement – there remains always the question whether it is properly so taken. But beyond the creativity of value-judgement there is no such justificatory appeal possible. The human world of articulated and ordered value, recreated continuously and open-endedly in human collaborative exchange, is ultimate.

There is a deep modern reluctance to accept that such a claim can make sense, that the human world of value, so founded, can stand. Doubt as to whether such an approach, essentially undetermined and 'objectively' unconstrained as it is, can engage us with *reality*, is often expressed, misleadingly, as doubt whether that kind of procedure can count as *rational*. But the assumptions behind our ideal of rationality are often themselves forms of just this profound doubt about, or lack of confidence in, human creativity. This seems to me to be clearly evidenced in our difficulties with commensurability.

We get into difficulties over commensurability because of the inappropriate model of *responsibility* which we are drawn to apply to value-judgement. "A is better than B", we conclude, after weighing the implications. If this conclusion is not merely arbitrary, then it must have been arrived at under some kind of constraint – it must *respond to* something. The tendency is then to think of this in terms of some ordering of values which in the process of weighing we apprehend. This ordering gets its grip on our judgements through the requirements of rational consistency – which, in terms of comparisons, we can take for argument's sake to mean transitivity and completeness.⁵ But the idea of consistency itself turns on the idea of truth: to note that "A is better than B", "B is better than C" and "C is better than A" are inconsistent statements is to observe that they cannot be true together. The appeal here is to a certain kind of relation between our utterances and reality, and the lurking model of responsibility is that applicable to veridical statement – our responsibility to speak as far as possible in conformity with 'things as they are'. The constraint on a judgement of comparative heaviness, what it is responding to, is the *fact of the matter* that will in normal circumstances obtain; and if three objects have each as a matter of fact a certain heaviness, necessarily the least heavy weighs less than the most heavy. It is this kind of thought which backs *completeness* as an aspect of consistency – if the *de re* possession by objects of a given property is what is at issue, then necessarily any one has such a property in greater or lesser degree than any other, or they are equal.

We know intuitively that this model misrepresents value; value is not a property which is 'there', either in the world beyond us or as some determinate preference-function within, in a way which would back the completeness require-

⁵ *Transitivity* holds among values in a domain when, for any three such values A, B and C, if A is better than B and B is better than C, then A is better than C. *Completeness* holds when, for any two such values A and B, either A is better than B, or vice-versa, or they are equal.

ment. Harmony is valuable and so is affluence, but we do not want this to mean that harmony and affluence have in different degrees (or in the same degree) some objective property of being valuable. Naturally enough, given the formulation of the completeness requirement, we take this as an indication of incommensurability: harmony is neither more nor less valuable than, nor equal in value to, affluence.

But, as we have seen, we routinely make in particular situations perfectly well-grounded attributions of comparative value to such goods – we make judgements which come down to saying that, *here*, harmony outweighs affluence or vice-versa. How can such judgements be grounded in an appropriate rational consistency without commensurability between these two goods? Yet the kind of commensurability which we reintroduce by saying, in effect, that our judgement "A is better than B" *makes* the values commensurate, then does not do what we want – for however transitive and complete the ordering which springs into life across the relevant domain from the weights we allocate, these won't be characteristics or aspects of a *consistency* requirement – as it were, they spin loose. It looks like the kind of case where someone says: "I'll abide consistently by the letter and spirit of these rules, providing it's agreed that I can alter them whenever I want" – a situation in which evidently his consistency would count for nothing.

The whole idea-complex associated with *weighing* strikes in so aptly to our thought about value because it expresses the sense of our choices being guided from outside the will. I can only weigh something that *has a weight* independently of my feelings about it. But (as the problems with commensurability show) the implicit model of value as a property of things engaged with beyond the will is unworkable. Value just isn't like that. Environmental considerations strongly reinforce this recognition, but we might have known it anyway. Apart from anything else, if values *were* like that, there would remain deep mystery over how they could guide us. What different things weigh, and in general what properties things have in what degrees, cannot guide us to action without a prior determination of the will. ("Choose the heavier" cannot stand on its own as a guide – it needs us to have chosen, as it were, to be *interested* in heaviness.) But then that determination of the will seeks guidance, and we have either a regress or apparent arbitrariness.

Value-commensurability – to put it again in terms of that – seems necessary in order to account for the role that responsible value-judgement plays in our lives, but also unable, in the only conditions under which it makes sense, to do the conceptual job for which we think we require it. This is a fairly classic philosophical fly-bottle.

The way out is to recognise that, when we conclude after taking evaluative thought that "A is better than B", the constraint to which we respond is no more and no less than that essentially involved in our having made a creative self-commitment – and this gives us all the guidance, all the rationality and consistency that we need. The idea of creativity here is, in fact, that of a non-arbitrary self-determination of the will which constitutes the relevant reality with which it engages.

Explicating this perhaps paradoxical-seeming idea leads us also, I believe, to an understanding of how our human construction of value can avoid anthropocentric hubris.

VI.

In this connection, we need to note three central and inherent conditions on value-judgement – conditions arising out of the idea of judgement itself, and its of due exercise.⁶ (I think they are necessary conditions, though I canvass some doubts about this this briefly below; but it does not matter vitally to my argument if they turn out to be something logically less pristine – at any rate, they are crucial criteria of judgement.)

In the first place, such a judgement cannot be taken over from others. If, faced with the need to judge values, I simply adopt your view, I have not made any judgement about the matter directly in hand. (I may have judged that your views on such questions are reliable, but that is a different matter.) Call this the condition of *originativity*. This is a horrible word which I have invented (though "originative" appears in the *Shorter Oxford*) to avoid the suggestions that would be conveyed by 'original'; my judgement does not have to break fresh ground or startle with its novelty to be a real judgement – it just has to be mine. I must necessarily judge values *for myself*.

But not *to suit myself* – this is the second condition. A value-judgement arrived at with half an eye, or any eye, to how I *want* the balance of benefit to turn out, is equally no judgement. Genuine value-judgement is about keeping our thumbs out of the pan – a vastly more difficult business than this handy metaphor suggests, given the unremitting insistence and subtly insidious pervasiveness of ego. Call this the condition of *disinterestedness*.

Obviously there are many kinds of judgement naturally expressed in terms of better and worse, benefits and costs, which are not subject to this condition – judgements where what I, or we, want or don't want is precisely to the point. Here, it seems to me, is the use of the distinction between values and *preferences*. The latter, we might say, are typically expressed by statements which have the form and some of the functions of value-judgements, but which fail the condition of disinterestedness. The perception that preferences answer ultimately to values and not vice-versa (the denial of ethical subjectivism) is then the perception that this condition of disinterestedness must be met *somewhere* – for if it were not, all judgement would be essentially self-serving, and would fail in the kind of outward-directedness which the third condition intimates.

This third condition is much the most difficult to capture. One is moving towards it when one says that a value-judgement must have its eye on the object.

⁶ Anything of any value in the following is owing to the English literary critic F. R. Leavis, who developed out of his critical practice the leading ideas which I am trying to take over for my own purposes. If these ideas are muddled here, it is I who have muddled them. See in particular Leavis 1969, ch.1, and Leavis/Leavis 1970, ch.5.

This is not quite the same thing as not having an eye to oneself; I may express myself disinterestedly, but also more or less gratuitously, at random. Again, this is not genuinely to judge. In value-judgement, it matters what I say. This is not a requirement that what I say has to *matter* in some portentous way to the world at large – we can judge carefully about things of small or private importance – nor that it just has to matter *to me*. Nor is it that it has to matter as much or as little as what it is about matters, for this would be to smuggle back in the idea of a value constraining the judgement 'objectively'. However, something to do with the idea of objectivity *is* in play here. Say rather that a judgement matters through having to engage with and be informed by the things being judged as they are in themselves. (I put this obscurely, but can't presently do better.) Call this the condition of *attention*.⁷

It is this condition, perhaps taken together with that of disinterestedness, which gives us all we actually need by way of a consistency requirement on value-judgement. For no such conditions of un-self-distorted attention to what confronts us – what Murdoch (1970, 34) calls "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" – will be met by putative judgements which do not take appropriate account of what one has said or might say about relevantly similar matters. Nor (very importantly) are they likely to be met by putative judgements uninformed by awareness of what others might say whom one trusts also to see what is there – all the essential collaborativeness of creative judgement is contained in this clause.

The three conditions proposed above are conditions on the kind of value-judgement which I have called 'creative'; appropriately, they seem to me paralleled by equally inherent conditions applying to the more explicit creativity of art. Work which we are prepared to recognise, in any artistic medium, as creative must carry the stamp of originative individuality – it cannot be borrowed in spirit or essential form from others. But nor can it issue from or answer to the merely individual psychology of the artist as *ego* (hence the sad irony of so many 'creative writing' lessons) – necessarily personal, it must not be limitingly personal. And though it can be lighthearted (think of Mozart), it cannot be frivolous – it must address the real, and have some bearing on what can be made of human life. I cannot defend what may seem dogmatic in these offered parallels now, but I think they are at any rate suggestive.

Further support for the idea that these conditions express something genuinely distinctive about value-judgement comes from the way they serve to distinguish it from the adoption or entertaining of a belief. Belief has to be neither originative nor disinterested to count as such. If I believe something because I am told to, or because I want it to be true, I still *believe* it. Much, no doubt, will be amiss with my doxastic strategy if all or even many of my beliefs arise in those ways; but what I will then have will be an unreliably-formed set of beliefs, not a lack of beliefs. But if putative value-judgements are not originative, disinterested and

⁷ The term comes from Iris Murdoch, who in turn acknowledges Simone Weil, in Murdoch 1970, ch.1.

attentive, they are not really judgements at all, but something other (expressions of deference, need or impulse) masquerading as such.

This last claim might be challenged. Can't we meaningfully say that someone's value-judgements are entirely conventional, self-regarding or based just on impulse? I myself think that what we actually have in these locutions is an 'inverted commas' use (or a range of such uses) of the term *judgement*. But, as I began the section by saying, nothing vital turns on this. For it is clear enough that under these circumstances not only his approach to value-judgement but his *judgements as such* are impugned in a way to which there is nothing correspondent when beliefs are in question (beliefs held on authority, or with stars in our eyes, can still after all be true).

This is important in relation to the distinction between values and preferences, noted above in connection with disinterestedness. The point is not that there is a privileged kind of judgement which somehow does not arise out of individual apprehension and appetency – all our judgements are subject to these conditions, and none is therefore free from the pressures of an interested concern for what we, as individuals, want. There are many kinds of case, the proper domain of preference, in which attending to the promptings of such a concern is all we have to do; and this can involve a form of weighing (deciding what we *really* want). But there is a kind of constraint, and thus a kind of tension, essentially absent here. Finally, nothing corresponds to keeping my thumb out of the pan, or to having it in there, when I am deciding what I like or want. But as soon as I am trying to decide what may be urged as a ground of action for *others too*, the question of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of my self-involvement in judgement *does* arise; and this is precisely because we seek through such judgements to create the kind of commonly-accessible moral world in relation to which the idea-complex of commensurability makes sense. (All significant judgements about environmental issues will obviously be of this kind.)

VII.

My three conditions, then, define an often exacting *impersonality* as internal to the idea of value-judgement. Exacting, because it will be apparent that the conditions are in radical tension, and in any situation where the need for judgement presses on us – where issues are unclear, and of personal or public moment – these tensions can readily become acute. Striving to see implications originatively, to see for myself, I inevitably find myself looking through the distorting glass of *selfhood*, drawn towards that subjectivity which reduces values to an expression of my personal concerns; striving, against that temptation, back towards disinterestedness, I can slip imperceptibly away from attention and into that safe conventionality of perception which would absolve me from self-committal. Value-judgement is always threatening in these ways to fail in due impersonality and cease to be itself. The need to negotiate its inherent tensions is the essential constraint under which it operates, and to which it responds. I am

claiming, that is, that our negotiation between these three poles of attraction, or nodes of force, with its corresponding sense of the outcome as an achieved equipoise, is what principally lies behind the aptness of metaphors drawn from weighing and balancing to characterise our activity of thought in value-judgement. At the heart of this process is the achievement of impersonality, the issuing of judgement from an ego-free living concern for the world confronting myself and others. It is this which is really at stake as we move consideringly among the various orders of evaluative terminology which ethical language makes available to us, in search of the right way to capture what is at issue in particular contexts of choice and action – the way that best accommodates what we know of others' responses, and what can be proved on our own pulses, in relation to what we take to be there.

This is why such weighing, the essential commensuration of values, fails to grip at any abstract level divorced from specific real, or really imaginable, contexts of evaluation – so that some opposed goods can appear to be in themselves of incommensurable value, while creative value-judgement in concrete situations can justify choice between them.

The ground of responsibility in value-judgement is, therefore, the achieved impersonality of a concern arising in and through me, but not *mine* in any possessive, ego-centred way. Judgement is necessarily the exercise of perception and will, living forces acting only through individual beings – but not acting *on behalf of* that so-easily separated and enclosed individuality. One wants to say: I judge responsibly of value, insofar as I can awaken in myself a kind of concern which *I serve*, rather than which serves me. Now I am very well aware that none of this is anything like as clear as philosophers (or at least, Anglophone philosophers) prefer – but we are in an area where that kind of clarity may be a misleading aspiration. What I am trying to gesture towards is the fundamental way in which creative thought, even in so comparatively mundane a deployment as the everyday negotiation of value, answers to something wider than ourselves, but also essentially present and focussed *as* ourselves.

There is, I think, an obvious point to calling this something *life*. And on reflection, what else could one call it?⁸

Indeed, the felicity of saying that we judge out of our belonging in a wider-than-personal life, and that our judgements strive to express the spontaneity and outward-directed creativity of that life, should be readily enough apparent to people in whom an ecological consciousness has begun to stir. For I am claiming that it is to what we share with the wider living world, the world of apprehension and appetency at large, that the separating and self-directed elements in our personhood must be brought back in value-judgement if such judgement is to

⁸ Anyone who responded with 'society' or 'culture' here would have missed the point of *originativity*. Something existing only as an abstraction cannot be present *as* our individual judgement. But *life* precisely does not exist only as an abstraction.

make sense of itself.⁹ Value-judgement is grounded in, and warranted by, as well as perpetually re-enacting, our accepting participation in the creative life of nature.

VIII.

The very possibility of coherent evaluative judgement thus depends on a radically unhubristic and non-anthropocentric relation of humans to the wider life of nature. There is no fundamental conflict between the need recognised by deep ecologists to respect and defer to this life, and the need recognised by practical policy-makers for trade-offs, based on explicit and defensible orderings of priority, among environmentally-relevant options.

Not only is there, so far as I can see, no other kind of basis on which human judgement could claim the right to assess, rank and 'manage' the rest of nature; there is also no other spirit in which it is likely, given the often irreversibly destructive technologies with which we are now armed, to be even modestly successful in so doing. Certainly the history of other approaches, based on understandings of value-judgement which place humans in a different, detached or dominant relation to the wider life, does not augur well. Of course, as things now are, we have to evaluate and plan in a way that unprecedentedly affects the living world at large. But recognition that it is only our inherent creativity which enables us to make sense of that role, and that such creativity expresses the accommodation of ourselves to a life-thrust shared with all that living world, may serve to make us more humble – and with the only sort of humility which could profit us, that in which there is no taint of self-interest.

It is, I think, something of this awareness which lies behind our suspicion, noted at the outset, that 'We should not extinguish species' cannot really be cashed out in the terms of melioristic thinking. The claim just expresses, we instinctively feel, too deep an attachment and acknowledgement for weighing up. We can now see how that feeling comes from a recognition that our attachment to spontaneously living nature lies in an important sense beyond the domain of evaluative priority, as its *ground*. If that is so, it must surely constitute the great, central, literally unchallengeable acceptance on which environmental policy (our considered collective interaction with the natural world) is founded. Unfortunately I cannot develop this idea further within the limits of the present paper; but its implications for defending a deep ecology perspective on policy are clear enough.

To sum up: Value is essentially comparative. To talk of the value of a good is necessarily to talk of what can be weighed up in terms of the costs and benefits attaching to particular choices involving that good. Economists concerned with the environment are right to seize on this and to point to its implications for rational decision-making in a complex society. They are right, for the purposes of

⁹ Thus these thoughts seem to me to coincide with much of the *motivation* behind the 'transpersonal ecology' of Warwick Fox; I stress the motivation, because the 'holism' in which, for Fox, they result, seems to me so entirely destructive. See Fox 1990.

their own proper contribution to the policy process, to seek methods of generalising value-comparisons in terms of 'currencies' which will at least engage with, where they cannot be represented by, money.

Value so conceived is rooted in the human will and the world of value is a human creation. Deep ecologists are right to seize on this, and to point to the dangers inherent in it – basically, the dangers of our continuing to make value-judgement about the claims of the natural world subservient to our will to dominate and 'manage' that world inappropriately.

They are, however, misguided if they express this concern in terms of the incommensurability of environmental values; in the sense in which this idea is right, it doesn't help their case, and in the sense in which it helps, it isn't right. Finally the idea of incommensurable value guiding choice is empty. But it is the creativity of our judgement which sustains the necessary commensurability.

Acknowledging this creativity, its nature and role helps us glimpse how the political vision of deep ecology might be justified in a way which could also guarantee the political relevance of environmental economics.

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