DEBATE

Green Liberalisms:
Nature, Agency and the Good

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Marcel Wissenburg’s *Green Liberalism* attempts to reconcile liberalism and ecologism by capturing the substance of most green demands within a formalistic liberal framework. Using historical analysis, I argue that formalistic modern liberalisms in practice reverse into particular models of human nature and the self, embodying particular background ideals of human nature, flourishing and agency which may be more or less conducive to green outcomes. Contrasting Lockean and Millian liberalism, I argue that Wissenburg’s work is ultimately flawed for green outcomes through use of a formal scheme which enshrines a quasi-Lockean subject–object division in which human preferences are projected onto nature in economistic fashion, tending to squeeze out soft values of encounter with nature. Wissenburg’s invocation of classical virtues to offset market instrumentalism is too underdeveloped to counterbalance this bias, and I maintain that the broader background ideals found in pragmatist or Millian political pluralism are practically needed to generate green outcomes.

The tension between green political prescriptions and the standard political priorities of liberal political theory, as instantiated in the contemporary liberal democratic state, has now been a staple of debate in the field for some time. It has manifested itself at several levels: in the arguments between moral monists and moral pluralists in environmental ethics, in the apparent linkages of liberal thought with atomism and instrumentalism in green accounts of the history of ideas, and in the vexed question of the compatibility of green political ideals with liberal democratic institutions. Yet with the publication of Marcel Wissenburg’s *Green Liberalism*, the first full-length argument for the capacity of the liberal democratic state to deliver much of the green agenda, the debate has entered a new phase.

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away with arguments for intrinsic value, its thought-provoking reflections on procreative rights and its stimulating attempt to map out a weakly anthropocentric rough path between ‘the short-term ecological modernisation and the often politically unfeasible long-term ecological Utopianism approaches’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 3] is now required reading; green thinkers, whether they are of anti-liberal persuasion or, like this writer, supporters of a broadly green critique of the status quo but fearful of throwing out the liberal baby with the extraneous Enlightenment bathwater, will have to engage with Wissenburg’s arguments and respond to them if they can. In this article I want to sketch out the areas of Wissenburg’s argument which I regard as most problematic, and then set out the initial elements of my response.

We should note first of all that Wissenburg’s project is liberal first and green second; his focus is avowedly on ‘the rules used by the political system at the moment of decision-making’ and his guiding question that of whether ‘the rules of a liberal democratic system themselves [can] in any way accommodate g’s type of preferences for a greener world, regardless of the current type of preferences of the individuals who accidentally happen to be around?’, a question which he broadly answers in the affirmative [Wissenburg, 1998: 17–18]. In this respect, to contextualise the debate, Wissenburg and I are coming to the same rough point on the political territory, namely that of a middle path between the excesses of green utopianism and the technofix of ecological modernisation, but we are coming from different directions and carrying different epistemological baggage.

Part of this baggage, as should become clear later, is my attachment to classical American pragmatism, a theory which shares the liberal emphases on fallibilism, pluralism and toleration, but also insists upon the situated and environmentally embodied status of any judging agent, and in this analysis I intend to focus on Wissenburg’s conceptions of human nature and agency, along with the related concerns with liberal neutrality and the good, only obliquely using my criticisms here to argue against Wissenburg’s instrumentalised view of subjectivist value, and thus for a more fully greened type of liberal society. In doing so, I shall argue that the implicit human nature and agency models present in liberalism, when taken in conjunction with the way in which elements of human nature may be either encouraged or suppressed through the choices of particular liberties advocated by particular liberal thinkers, in practice tend to reverse into a broad regulative ideal of the moral and political agent, and moreover that some such regulative ideals are healthier for green outcomes than others. In other words, an appropriate theory of the self, however abstract this topic may be, is a conditio sine qua non for the justification/legitimisation of
ecological policies in the concrete context of modern liberal democratic societies. With these points flagged in advance, let us now move on to the essential outlines of Wissenburg’s scheme that will be examined.

Wissenburg conceives of contemporary liberal democracy as resting on three pillars of principle: those of liberty, equality and democracy. Within this framework, liberal democratic politics is represented as ‘the existence, on a collective level, of mediating and reconciliatory mechanisms (state, market, education, etc.), transforming the claims of individuals to benefits and the reduction of burdens into formal rights via the recognition of valid claims by means of principles of social justice’; the system is thus ‘a particular form of input–output machine, transforming the preferences of individuals into rights for individuals’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 9, 11]. Within Wissenburg’s treatment, preferences are treated as given, a move which he acknowledges to be practically unrealistic but maintains is predominantly methodological in intent, and similarly he repudiates any ‘interference by higher authorities [i.e. the state] in the process of preference formation’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 220]. Human agency is thus represented at a high level of formal abstraction, and though Wissenburg does devote some space to the history of liberal political thought and its increasing abandonment of formal metaphysical grounding in conceptions of human nature, as well as taking care to distinguish political from full-blown economic liberalism, his own version of agency is typically modern in its formalism. Just as Rawls’s agents in the original position are abstract genderless beings who are unaware of their conceptions of the good or the talents and social stations which await them once the veil of ignorance is lifted, so Wissenburg’s model of agency is effectively that of a black box which projects preferences into the political mechanism.

This formalism is continued in a further area of focus, and the one which I shall begin with in earnest. This is Wissenburg’s effective acceptance, though he does not explicitly use the terminology, of the definition of a liberal state as being one which is neutral between competing conceptions of the good; in his own characterisation of the matter, he argues for ‘the “liberty of life” to design and pursue any reasonable plan of life’ where ‘no moral standard, hence no individual plan of life … should be privileged over any other’, and allocates it as a defining duty for a liberal democratic polity that it must ‘show equal respect, i.e. not to favour any plan or conception of life over any other’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 43]. This type of definition of the liberal state is, of course, very much a standard of contemporary political theory, though as I shall try to indicate later, it is perhaps less contentious as a characterisation in general theoretical discourse than it properly ought to be when viewed in the wider liberal historical context.
The final main element of Wissenburg’s characterisation that I plan to give critical attention to is that which is by his own admission the least developed area of the book, namely his invocation of civic virtue. Wissenburg, in a defence of economic liberalism that places the onus on the consumer but none the less stops short of libertarian extremes, appears to place a great deal of weight on this concept, as arguably he must do given his refusal to countenance state intervention in preference formation. Indeed, he explicitly argues that ‘green liberalism requires individual responsibility to be viable: citizen virtue but even more civic virtue, and particularly virtue in the market place’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 90]. Yet remarkably, beyond a few remarks on virtue in the medieval market, the idea remains largely undeveloped. I shall argue that Wissenburg is right to acknowledge the need for this component, but that the combination of his highly abstract human agency theory with his conflation of subjective with instrumental values and refusal to engage in speculation on preference formation leaves him bereft of sufficient theoretical tools to make the presence of this notion convincing in the face of the corrosive effects of market instrumentalisation of the world.

With these main targets for analysis now outlined, let us begin with an examination of the standard characterisation of the liberal state as one defined by its neutrality between competing conceptions of the good.

**Neutrality and Agency: Wissenburg, Locke and Mill**

Wissenburg’s implicit characterisation of the liberal state as one which is neutral between competing conceptions of the good is one that is characteristic of twentieth-century liberalism, and it is important to recognise the provenance of the notion. First, as Jeremy Waldron observes, this neutrality ‘is not and cannot be the doctrine that legislation should be neutral in relation to all moral values’, nor the equally incoherent claim that legislation should somehow be ‘value-free’ [Waldron, 1989: 72]. Rather, neutrality is itself a value, a value which is instrumental in securing some good, in the same way that the impartiality of a judge is instrumental in achieving justice. The point is thus that neutrality is the right position to adopt, rather than that neutrality is legitimated by virtue of there being no good to be promoted or ill to be combated in legislation. There must, of course, be reasons, either directly or indirectly to do with some formulation of citizens’ welfare, as to why neutrality is the correct procedure, and in what follows I shall argue that such a formulation will itself be value-laden and necessarily involve either overt or covert recourse to regulative ideals of human nature, to what a human being is and what they may or ideally ought to become.
We must now turn to why neutrality is a good, and thus we come to the indirect character of the liberal values of individual liberty and diversity. As the impossibility of a liberal legislator being neutral about the value of neutrality implies, liberalism may be agnostic as to the nature of the good life, but it must contain some conception of the necessary requirements for a good life; as Rawls would put it, it must have a notion of primary goods. Since much of the justification of the state’s official agnosticism on the nature of the good is precisely to enable the flourishing of a plurality of differing conceptions of the good, chosen by different free agents, then the most obvious and central values here are those of individual liberty and social diversity; the core intuition is perhaps best summed up by Mill, in his assertion that ‘if a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode’ [Mill, 1984: 135]. The two values interconnect in that the practical worth of liberty, the exercise in self-reliance and self-creation which acting freely involves, will necessarily require a diverse range of options to choose from, and inevitably, the choice of primary goods will frame the broad character of the polity.

Though the notion of neutrality does indeed appear to articulate long-standing liberal concerns, it is well worth recognising that the use of this rather abstract term as a defining characteristic of liberalism is, as Goodin and Reeve note, a recent development; indeed, Waldron sees no explicit formulation in these terms before 1974 [Goodin and Reeve, 1989: 1; Waldron, 1989: 62]. This habitually high level of theoretical abstraction is a striking characteristic of modern liberalism more generally, as already noted in relation to Wissenburg and Rawls, though one that has not gone uncriticised in recent times. Yet I believe that as a characterisation of the essence of a liberal state, it should be seen as what it is: effectively a scholastic device, an explanatory hook on which to hang a variety of theories, rather than a characterisation of liberalism tout court as Wissenburg appears to assume. Notoriously, of course, what it means to treat individuals equally under a neutral state is itself an immensely morally contested field, with contests becoming especially notable when liberal values are deployed against the prevailing interpretation of neutrality within the state at the time. I want now to bring up some historical examples, those of Locke and Mill, which may shed light and also cast doubts upon the adequacy of the contemporary characterisation of the liberal state, and in particular on Wissenburg’s ahistorical, formalistic variant of this.

The first example is that of Locke – a, and perhaps the, major source of inspiration for liberals over the past centuries. I have provided an extensive reading of Locke’s political philosophy in relation to nature and property.
elsewhere [Stephens, 1999], and shall not go into the full details of that
reading here. Rather, what concerns us are those areas of Locke’s thought
which pertain to agency, neutrality and the good.

We should note first that while Locke’s philosophy explicitly abandons
any search for a classically definitive summum bonum of human life and
happiness, this was not due to any agnosticism on his part as to the nature
of the good. On the contrary, Locke was adamant to the last that the
injunctions of the natural law could be known and proved, that reason was
the faculty that would reveal ‘right reason’, the dictates of the natural law
itself, and that the field of morality was an area in which demonstrable
truths could be found, given patient application, with mathematical
certainty [Locke, 1975: 549–50; Locke, 1958: 149]. We find his own
working out of these issues in the writings on Christianity, education,
toleration and, of course, politics, but also in his reflections on human
nature in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Key in these areas
is the classic Protestant concern with the individual, and the related work
ethic associated with Weber’s analysis; it is this which is focal in Locke’s
statement that God gave the earth ‘to the use of the Industrious and
Rational’, especially when set against his sarcasm about the ‘irrational
untaught Inhabitants’ of ‘Woods and Forests’ who ‘keep right by following

Locke, for all his status as an icon of liberal toleration, had no time for
the conceptions of freedom held by the folk traditions of sylvan liberty, and
was a fervent apologist for enclosure and Baconian agricultural
improvements that would maximise production, even being prepared to
extend royal prerogative for ‘God-like Princes’ who promote the ‘increase
of lands and the right employing of them’ [Locke, 1988: 378, 298]. What
matters from our perspective here is not only that those who appropriate for
productive and transformative purposes are acting under the divine
injunction to ‘subdue the Earth’ and ‘lay out something upon it’ that was
their own [Locke, 1988: 291], but that in doing so they are simultaneously
expressing moral rationality, generating value by their labour, and
expanding the sphere of concrete human freedom against determinate
nature.

Locke, then, had little doubt about the existence of an objective good,
and was strongly convinced of the character of this good. In relation to the
goal of state neutrality noted earlier, we can see merely from these extracts
that the state may be granted additional powers to promote a core goal, that
of a particular conception of liberty, a conception which closely ties liberty
and moral rationality to a dynamic of transformative labour. Locke’s praise
of the industrious farmer who maximises production could not be more
explicit on this transformative dynamic; it is, he informs us, ‘Labour indeed
that puts the difference of value on every thing’, use-value being 99 per cent ‘on the account of labour’, whereas ‘Land that is wholly left to Nature’ is ‘called, as indeed it is, wast’ [Locke, 1988: 296–7].5 The imparting of value is given by a manifestation of free will, and this manifestation is initiative; since only man has this dimension, then only man can appropriate and transform nature. Hence a particular conception of liberty, a conception which ties it to productive expansionist labour, is intimately tied to the conception of neutrality involved; the state should not violate particular rights of property, not merely for theological-cum-deontological reasons, but because productive labour manifests the distinctly human trait of initiative. Economic enrichment, provided that it is carried out without violation of others’ rights and done for the right reasons rather than through mere greed and the quest for power, is regarded as an unquestioned morally laden objective good – hence Locke’s comparison of the English day labourer with a native American king, in which he ignores consideration of status or relative utility to pronounce the lot of the former, who has transformed nature for economic advantage, to be unequivocally better.6

In this instance, then, neutrality is not only constructed in a particular way – that is, based on a particular notion of liberty – but is intimately tied to and justified by particular ideas of objective goods to be promoted through it. Neutrality is thus adopted not merely to rule out certain activities whilst leaving a free space elsewhere, but also to promote a particular conception of liberty as the good life; the system, though not attempting to enforce a set uniform morality by directly coercive state methods, can thus be none the less seen to possess a dynamic which will implicitly promote some goods while downgrading others. And this impression is reinforced by a consideration of Locke’s views on human nature and agency, as manifested in the Essay.

To begin with, we should note that in the treatment which follows, I am not assuming any form of naturalistic fallacy, of a simple ‘reading off’ of the good from human nature. Rather, what is significant is that conceptions of the good must require as background some notion of the type of being that a human is, and in this sense the differing accounts of human flourishing, of what it is to be a free, autonomous human individual self of integrated and fulfilled type, found in Locke and Mill are significant. To start with the issue of liberty, it is notable that the anti-naturalistic transformative dynamic manifested in relation to outer nature is equally present in his treatment of human inner nature. Here it seems proper to invoke two significant Essay passages in which Locke discusses desire and the will. He notes that man has ‘a power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires, and so … is at liberty to consider the objects of them; examine them on all sides, and weigh them … In this lies
the liberty Man has … in this seems to consist that, which is (as I think improperly) call’d Free will” and moreover “tis as much a perfection, that desire or the power of Preferring should be determined by Good, as that the power of Acting should be determined by the Will’.” This seems important. Humans have the power to evaluate their desires and suspend the will, interposing rational judgement before activating it to the best course of action, whereas animals merely operate instinctively; in the same manner, humans can interpose appropriation between their desire for subsistence and the satisfaction of it. Freedom is thus partly defined in terms of external action and the repression of internal nature. In both cases the result is an increase in value, and a manifestation of distinctively human autonomy.

Moving on to the related topic of the self, the main touchstone for Locke may be found in his analysis in Book II of the Essay. Locke’s treatment of the self here clearly runs the passive cognitive self into the active conative self, constantly linking together the ego with egoism. We hear, for example, that the self is ‘that conscious thinking thing … which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure and Pain’ and is therefore concerned for itself ‘as far as that consciousness extends’; that ‘all the Right and Justice of Reward and Punishment’ is founded in personal identity, both happiness and misery being that ‘for which every one is concerned for himself, not mattering what becomes of any Substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness’, and further that the personality ‘extends it self beyond present Existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable’, at root because we find ‘a concern for Happiness the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness, that which is conscious of Pleasure and Pain, desiring, that that self, that is conscious, should be happy’ [Locke, 1975: 341–2, 346].

Not only is the account here clearly egoistic, but it is an identifiably utilitarian egoism. Indeed, one contemporary utilitarian thinker prominently includes Locke amongst Bentham’s intellectual ancestors in the tradition [Hayry, 1994: 4, 10–11, 20–21, 24–5]. Moreover, Locke sees desire as an uneasiness, brought about by the absence of something enjoyable, but an uneasiness to be positively used, ‘the chief if not only spur to Humane Industry and Action’ [Locke, 1975: 230]. Importantly, this demonstrates that for Locke, not only were men basically self-interested, but their actions were fundamentally driven by the uneasiness of desire, especially acquisitive desire. And here Locke’s utilitarian and possessive concerns are curiously linked, for he tells us that the ‘greatest Happiness consists in having those things which produce the greatest Pleasure’, rather than in enjoying them, whilst at the same time insisting that the acquisitive quest is dynamic, propelled by ‘a constant succession of uneasinesses’, desires which ‘take the will in their turns’ [Locke, 1975: 269, 262].

8
By implication, nature primarily exists to possess and remould, not to respect as it is, and such desires are in principle infinite, giving a powerful expansionist dynamic to his Baconian vision of increased agricultural production through enclosure, private ownership and experiment. We should also note the radical atomism of the approach: subject and object are not linked, but primordially separate, whereby ‘every one is concerned for himself, not mattering what becomes of any Substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness’.

The moral key for Locke is to acquire the right desires, training acquisitiveness to economically productive impact whilst restraining desires that would violate Christian natural law; as such, the model of the human agent involved and the values attributed to particular liberties in the Lockean account of neutrality are deeply intertwined with a particular ideal type. Locke did not believe that one could or should impose this ideal directly by physical coercion, but it non the less informs his entire project: it is, so to speak, a regulative ideal of the human agent, a vision of what the human being is and should (if possible) ideally become, an implicit benchmark linking nature and ethics, is and ought. In appropriation, the atomised agent projects themselves on to the world, annexes a spiritual domain of initiative on to Newtonian matter, making it an owned productive object, and natural acquisitiveness, tempered by self-control, should promote this ‘only spur to Humane action’.

To draw on a phrase from Bob Brecher’s sharp little recent critique of liberal morality, the Lockean human being is, at root, ‘a wanting thing’, with the added presupposition that wants should, in principle, be satisfied. The self is thus a disconnected subject, and this disconnection, I believe, naturally lends itself to instrumental modes of perception. We may note in passing the striking resemblance between this atomised self, projecting desires onto the world, and Wissenburg’s model of agency, in which the human agent is represented as a black box which projects preferences into the polity, and should recognise how alarming the implications of this type of formalism are from a green perspective. For the more fully the subject is conceived as an impermeable, disconnected ‘wanting thing’, then the less any mutual and fluidic interchange between subject and object or full-blown experiential encounter are possible; as with the separative self of neoclassical economics, relationship will necessarily be increasingly modelled on egoism, ownership, annexation and instrumental extraction of worth, since altruism (for example) would imply that one subject’s happiness depended on what made another happy, and thus violate the assumption of independent preferences. In addition, precious little room is left for appreciation of nature in any sense other than as resource.

Moving on to Mill, we have a similar insistence on the priority of liberty,
but differently conceived so far as the weighting attached to particular liberties is concerned, and as a consequence, different attitudes to inner and outer nature are both implicit and made feasible. Mill’s defences of freedom of speech, and the worries over the harm principle, are already exhaustively analysed, but here I wish to focus more on the themes developed around human agency and nature in his writings, as a counterpoint to the previous example, drawing especially on the themes of *On Liberty* developed in his chapter on individuality. Mill’s work, as I have argued elsewhere [Stephens, 1996], is surely the classical liberal theory with which greens can find common ground, and a key factor in this is precisely the difference between the views of human agency and the self, and the different emphases on the particular liberties that may be held most important, that we find in his work.

Mill’s scheme differs from Locke’s, superficially, through its defence of individuality for its own sake. Social toleration of diversity is to be justified not merely because intolerance is irrational, as in Locke’s account of religious toleration, but through the need for a diversity of options from which the individual may form themselves as an individual, through the possibilities of social experiments in living, and through a fallibilism which insists on resisting any closure which might result in the rejection of possible truths. Just as Locke’s defence of his scheme was bound up with a particular conception of significant liberties that were ultimately tightly linked to results, so Mill’s more explicit consequentialism is anchored in a notion of social progress. Yet, and critically for green acceptability, this notion differs from the Lockean scheme of progress in the form of maximised productivity, and I broadly agree with John Barry in his recent pronouncement that it is a particular conflation of the idea of progress with its dominant present instantiation, the dream of ever-increasing economic growth and technological transformation, that really lies at the heart of green scepticism about ‘progress’ [Barry 1999: 249–55].

Mill’s emphasis is quite different from this Lockean-inspired dream. He explicitly repudiates the idea that human progress is logically necessary and automatic as being fallacious [Mill, 1974: 790–91], while his famous advocacy of an eventual ‘stationary state’ of economic growth rejects the equation of moral progress with such growth, instead affirming that such a state would allow ‘as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress … and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on’ [Mill, 1987: 750–51]. Yet his idea of human development is also broader than a merely intellectualist one. In fact, it is derived from a classical ideal, and economic and productive liberties are far from being the focus for Mill that they are for Locke. On *Liberty*, all too often thought of as a handbook
of arguments for free marketeers, is certainly not a defence of possessive individualism, and Mill is quite explicit in what limited treatment he does give to the question of state action on economic affairs in the last chapter of the work: ‘these are questions which, though closely connected with the subject of this Essay, do not, in strictness, belong to it … cases in which the reasons against interference do not turn upon the principle of liberty’ [Mill, 1984: 178]. Rather, what animates it, and similarly impacts upon the notions of neutrality and agency involved, is the aphorism from Von Humboldt which opens the work: ‘the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity’ [Mill, 1984: 69].

This emphasis, it should be made clear, does not merely appeal to diversity across society, but also to the development of the individual within it. Whereas Locke’s model of motivation and agency is ultimately a training of the wants of a ‘wanting thing’, time and again Mill invokes the notion of balancing a variety of diverse factors both in the society outside the individual personality and within the agent’s own personality, factors which include material desires but are not exhausted or primarily defined by them. Indeed, it is precisely the narrowness of the Lockean formulation that Mill objects to: ‘There is now scarcely any outlet for energy in this country’, he protests, ‘except business’. Against this, he argues for both the widest range of development of faculties and the greatest integration of them. ‘He who chooses his plan for himself’, he argues, ‘employs all his faculties’, an integration and development that is vital because it is ‘of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it’; in the perfecting of human works, ‘the first in importance surely is man himself’ [Mill, 1984: 138, 126–7].

What is significant about this vision is that it provides a set of naturalistic background assumptions of what the human agent may become, allied to an emphasis on individual liberty as the best manner of encouraging this development. Just as with Locke, the neutrality of the state, and the liberties it should allow, are set in the context of an account of human agency that employs a regulative ideal of human potentiality and development of inner nature. Against the Lockean egoist model, Mill has deployed a classical ideal of well-rounded development according to the inner nature of the individual, and even emphasises this with his insistence that ‘“Pagan self-assertion” is one of the elements of human worth, as well as “Christian self-denial” … It may be better to be a John Knox than an Alcibiades, but it is better to be a Pericles than either.’ We may also detect the presence of this vision in Mill’s otherwise bizarre invocation of Socrates as a utilitarian at the beginning of his essay Utilitarianism; both this and Mill’s division of higher and lower pleasures may be seen as a recasting of utilitarian morality into a variant of Aristotelian eudaemonia, not so much
happiness as fulfilment and flourishing through development of faculties. Most significantly, in his other significant citation from Von Humboldt in *On Liberty*, Mill makes this regulative ideal quite plain: ‘the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the external or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole’, and as such, this goal is that ‘towards which every human being must consistently direct his efforts … the individuality of power and development’ [Mill, 1984: 125].

We should also note that Mill, unlike Locke, implicitly takes on board the idea of the agent as a social and relational being. His complaints, about the homogenising effects of media, the compression of personality through the power of public opinion and the dangers of uniformity through mass market pressures were voiced as early as 1836 in the essay *Civilisation* and not only have a strikingly contemporary ring, but necessarily involve a conception of the agent as primarily interactive; subjects do not merely confront a determinate natural world, are not mere impermeable black boxes projecting given preferences into the void, but are in constant development and flux through the pressures of the information flowing from this process of encounter. In his writings on education and nature, Mill is eager to stress the need for respectful cultivation of innate natural energies rather than the imposition of information on to a Lockean tabula rasa, maintaining that it is ‘through such fostering, commenced early … that … the most elevated sentiments of which humanity is capable become a second nature, stronger than the first, and not so much subduing the original nature as merging it into itself’ [Mill, 1969: 396].

The latter part of this statement is especially significant, for genuine progress is to be conceived on a model of cultivation, of development informed by nature and its potentialities, a theme which I shall return to. What is significant here, however, is that Mill’s liberalism differs from Locke’s in being a form of evolutionary liberalism (to use Gus diZerega’s happy phrase) in which the individual is essentially a relational being, ‘more verb than thing, a gestalt of relationships’ rather than a disconnected atom, and the model of agency thus allows space for the forms of encounter and experience which greens habitually invoke against modernity’s ethos of estrangement.

What I have tried to demonstrate in these examinations is that the neutrality of the liberal state is, in a fully developed theory, intimately linked to goods of, or resulting from, liberty, and indeed to particular liberties, which may be ranked differently. The definitions of liberty and the ascriptions of priority to particular liberties (as, for example, in the limiting or expansion of the bundle of liberties involved in a property right) necessarily involves the assumption that these goods and liberties are more
important and morally fitting than others. Moreover, these goods are themselves necessarily conditioned and informed by ideas of human agency in the world and goods of human development, conceived either in a narrowly economistic way or more broadly across an ideal of wide potentiality. This necessarily involves recourse to some background model of human nature and potential against which the evaluative judgments must be mapped; unless it is taken as a Moorean non-natural property or suchlike metaphysical oddity, good cannot mean anything except by reference to some account of what sort of organism the good is good for, and classical liberals did not shirk such accounts.

Thus a Benthamite liberal will ultimately be driven back to the justificatory ground of pleasure/pain moral psychology when pressed, while Kant, whose ethics appear far removed from naturalism, none the less insisted on a ‘pure’ rational and universalist ethics precisely because he regarded reason as the home in which humans could find and act upon the transcendent demands of the moral law; emotional inclination was unsuitable for moral purposes because moral action must be free action and inclination, as the part of the human which shared in the determinate order of nature, opposed freedom. Hence an implicit human nature theory is still very much present. Nor did Kant’s scheme wholly abandon teleology in its understanding of human nature and its optimal course of development.14

The lesson to be drawn is that regulative ideals of the human agent and his or her nature and goods are practically unavoidable, for to state that some liberties are more important than others is effectively to make a moral choice, to state that some goods are more worth promoting than others; for this to have general justificatory backing it must appeal in turn to some broader vision of human nature and potential. Thus to say in a general political theory that consumer choice liberties are to trump liberties of political choice is effectively to say that human agents are more paradigmatically consumers than political animals, and that it is at least implicitly better for them to be so.

Two points seem to follow from these considerations. The first is that regulative ideals of the nature of the human agent, of the linkage between is and ought in terms of human potentialities and goods, are like the air bubble under the carpet: try to press them out and they will pop up unexpectedly somewhere else. Even the most abstract of models will tend to sit far more easily with certain naturalistic assumptions than others, as my earlier comments about Wissenburg’s preference-projecting black boxes may indicate. Secondly, if regulative ideals of the type I have outlined are unavoidable, then surely a liberal who truly upholds the values of liberty and diversity should opt for whichever model offers the widest range of developmental options.
Mill’s account, habitually thought of as a ‘thick’ theory in its many-sidedness, surely fits the bill here. It is probably true that not everyone can be Pericles, but Mill’s claim is not that only such a paragon may be considered possessed of ‘true’ human nature, and thus that a higher good must be invoked against those who fail to match it. Rather, it is that the ideal of the person who possesses the fullest breadth of talents and capacities is the best (because broadest) regulative ideal that we can employ as a guide at both the individual and social level, and this is precisely because of the central importance of liberty and diversity. The reality of specialisation in skills and knowledge today militates against this ideal, whilst the pervasive pressures to conceive of almost every human activity in terms of production and consumption does likewise by persistently squeezing out ‘soft’ non-material values like concern for nature; accordingly, it would appear all the more necessary to affirm the breadth of the Millite ideal precisely in the interests of diversity.

By comparison to these full-blown examples of classical liberalism, we can see that Wissenburg’s characterisation of the liberal state and human agency is rather descriptively anaemic. Moreover, in its refusal to question preferences and its disconnected ‘black box’ model of the agent, it bears a far stronger resemblance to the Lockean scheme than the Millite one: the preference-projecting ‘black box’ is identifiably a successor of the Lockean ‘wanting thing’. Indeed, the extent to which wants and Lockean mechanism dominate Wissenburg’s scheme becomes obvious when we recall again his explicit characterisation of the liberal polity: ‘a particular form of input-output machine, transforming the preferences of individuals into rights for individuals’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 11].

Wissenburg might reply that this resemblance is irrelevant, for his characterisation is intended methodologically rather than normatively. Yet given that the significance of his work is that his theory could (hopefully) at some stage be manifested in practice, the characterisation will need to be cashed out, and any consistent translation must retain the idea of the agent as essentially a disconnected being with given preferences. Indeed, Wissenburg himself insists on this aspect of disconnected agency, maintaining in an endnote that ‘pragmatism, unlike liberal political philosophy, links the observation that mind and its products develop in dialogue with their environment(s) to a sceptical attitude with regard to given preferences’ and thus ‘has a far less disinterested perspective on the value of nature than liberalism’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 230, fn.10].

Pragmatism is indeed emphatic on the linkage between the mind and environment; yet in my view, that is precisely the cause of pragmatism’s supremacy for these purposes. Nor, on the reading given, can Lockean political philosophy really be characterised as having a disinterested
perspective on preferences in relation to the value of nature. One need not suppose any causally idealist view of history to assert that in its atomism and its expansionist motivational dynamic, as well as the well documented formative impact of these on the economic thought of Adam Smith and the neo-classical marginalists [Cropsey, 1977; Wolin, 1960], Lockean political philosophy can be seen to stand at the historical root of the productionist imperative which greens set their faces against.

The revolution in values represented by Locke and by Baconian science was one which abandoned the original meaning of culture, *cultus*, the idea of cultivation (as later represented in Millite education) in which nature was one’s guide rather than one’s enemy, the idea of nature as a principle of development from which one learned through receptivity. With the ideal of culture as cultus dethroned, then from that point in history, as Strauss observes, it is not ‘resigned gratitude and consciously obeying or imitating nature but hopeful self-reliance and creativity’ that ‘become henceforth the marks of human nobility’ [Strauss, 1953: 248]; it is also this latter dynamic which informs the economistically inspired accounts of human motivation and agency that have dominated liberal political thought in the twentieth century, and which Wissenburg’s formalistic model is most closely related to.

A pragmatist perspective, by contrast, can be seen as closely related to the core values of liberalism – fallibilist toleration, moral pluralism, a democratic approach to truth and the encouragement of social experimentation – while lacking the commitment to economic instrumentalisation found in Lockean inspired liberal thought. In ethical approaches, pragmatism stands for an attempt to interweave and coherently balance values [Weston, 1992], just as Mill sought to balance the human agent’s impulses, rather than to formalise the individual into a purely choosing agent and resolve clashes by a head-count of given preferences. Indeed, the closeness of the connection between classical pragmatism and Mill’s brand of liberalism is illustrated by William James’ decision to dedicate his book *Pragmatism* to the memory of Mill, ‘whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader were he alive today’ [James, 1907].

This issue of agency and interaction with environment leads us on to our concluding considerations, focused on Wissenburg’s treatment of intrinsic value and the issue of virtue.

**Value, Virtue and Practices**

The fact that Wissenburg’s commitment to the disengaged agent must run deeper than a methodological device would is indicated by his treatment of intrinsic value. Here his typology, which reduces to four possible interpretations, is careful and probably represents the most definitive
categorisation of types currently available. Yet his treatment of them is, to put it mildly, odd. Whilst arguing, I think correctly, that ‘there can be no value without a valuer’, he gives the examples of staring at the night sky or meditating about infinity to claim that if we gain something from such cases, then ‘the stars above have a use, they are instruments in our attempts to fight boredom or depression or to relax’; because ‘anything we choose to do we do by definition for a reason … and the reason makes the act (looking up) and its prerequisites (the stars) means to whatever end our reasons are’. Later, following on from this argument for the necessary instrumentality and subjectivity of value, he even goes so far as to ‘use “external” and “instrumental” value as synonyms unless explicitly noted otherwise’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 96, 98], thus linking together subjectivism with instrumentalism as a necessary cognitive posture of valuing. This, I think goes too far.

My reason for holding this invokes Jamesian considerations of psychology and radical empiricism [James, 1912, 1918]. These are that in the data of real experience, consciousness selects, and does so on the grounds of worth and interest to us. We can of course give reasons as to why consciousness does this, and why we attend to what we do: we attend to what interests us. But whilst these are reasons, it does not follow that the reasons precede the act and thus make the value in question instrumental. If I am walking in the country and have my eye drawn by a pheasant flying from the undergrowth, I may watch the pheasant, and afterwards say that I found this pleasurable, interesting or whatever. But at the moment of contact, of being aware of something happening, I do not know, and may not have, a conscious reason for my eye being drawn; the instrumentality, the use-value if you prefer, is ascribed after the fact, not before. Yet clearly, from the mass of sensory data, I focused, I valued one portion of experience more highly than another, and did this before I could ascribe any instrumental value to it – quite simply, because I did not yet know what it was.

Hence from the fact that the experience was mine, and that I subsequently gave instrumental reasons for it, it does not follow that the value of the experience occurred for instrumental reasons, that I ‘used’ the pheasant as a means. On the contrary, it is precisely in moments of simple receptivity that the jaws of instrumental rationality are temporarily closed, and this may account for much of what is accounted special about nature experience, its role as a counterbalance to the instrumentality of technology and mass production that surrounds us at other times. At the wider political level, the point may also stand against Wissenburg’s wider classification of nature as instrumental resource (albeit one which should be sparingly used).
What I think this conflation of instrumentality with subjectivism illustrates is that Wissenburg has, however unwittingly, bought into the Lockean account of motivation that goes along with the baggage of the disengaged reasoning agent engaged in projecting preferences onto the world, thus squeezing out the possibility of appreciating nature other than in predefined use-value terms. If it is the case that we are self-interested detached social atoms, then it will also naturally follow that our reasons for action and perception will be predominantly instrumental, for the world will essentially look to us like a container of items for use, rather than (say) a set of possibilities for engaged relationship. Though it is logically possible to detach methodological assumptions of the Wissenburg type from the forms of rationality and assumptions that habitually go with them, this example may illustrate just how difficult that is, in practice, to do. Theories of agency and the self tend automatically to suggest fitting accounts of motivation, and nurture abhors a vacuum.

The example also illustrates a pragmatic point: though consciousness is informed by previous experience and will select accordingly, there is none the less a priority of experience to conceptualisations about experience. This in turn is significant from the perspective of Wissenburg’s invocation of virtuous practices, for the central issue raised by an agent who values instrumentally is that their activity will be geared to external goals: they turn up for work so that they will get paid, not because they are engaging in a practice of work that contains internal goals that they appreciate. This issue of cognitive posture towards experience is significant in several ways.

First, there is the issue of what we experience. Numerous green positions stress the role of direct experience of nature, and this stress does not only apply to wilderness experience in the American context. Rather, it can be seen to connect to green critiques of the modern self as disconnected, instrumentalised and narrow. In this respect, the critique links also to green communitarianism, attacks on the alienation of the modern subject and to the sometimes unfortunate demand from deep ecologists and their ilk for the ‘re-enchantment of the world’. What all these themes have in common is, I believe, a single core intuition, the intuition that what is missing about contemporary views of experience and the self is the sense of relational connection, and that as Anthony Weston has it, ‘this disconnection, on the deepest level, is “the environmental crisis”’ [Weston, 1994: 8].

The extent to which we should disconnect from immediacy of experience in order to control the world according to our free will is, as we saw in our examination of Locke, a demand that was originally motivated by expansionist intent. Yet it was motivated also by fear, for Locke is concerned that the ‘wanting thing’ that is the human agent must be restrained by reason, and the suppression of elements of inner and outer
nature go hand in hand, replacing an earlier model of human culture and development in which the key demand was on employing nature as a principle of development. *Cultus*, in the original Latin, carried no implications of denying nature, or opposing the human and natural as such. Rather, it implied being informed by nature, working *with* its own dynamics rather than imposing preset patterns upon it. And in order to do this, to recapture a model of harmonious interaction, it is necessary to have some nature to experience, and by this I do not necessarily mean wilderness; rather, I mean nature as counterpointed to human instrumental artifice of the Lockean era.

This links to my second point, that of how we experience, of our cognitive posture towards what we experience. Wissenburg’s assumption that the fact that our looking at the stars may render some utility to us means that we must necessarily regard the experience as instrumental posits the conscious reason for the action as being *prior to* the experience and geared to a further end of satisfaction. By doing so, he is then able to argue that we *have an instrumental interest beforehand*, and that this is projected outwards to the objects. But it does not follow that we must have an interest in a predefined sense; on the contrary, it may be that we look because we *are interested*, that, like every human child before they learn to instrumentalise the world, we remain open to experience and wonder. To *have an interest* is already to have to some extent limited and defined the subject matter of that interest, to regard it as something which one has a particular orientation towards, and in our present era, over which the shadow of Lockean possessive individualism hovers so powerfully, such interests are habitually thought of in possessive and consumptive terms; to *be interested*, by contrast, is to be engaged, to be open to the possibility of surprise in encounter and to the possibility of being guided by the object in the manner of the earlier notion of culture advanced, *cultus*. The initial cognitive posture is as significant as the presence of nature itself, since what we experience will be partly conditioned by how we approach it.

This point is easy to recognise if we take an example from intra-human relationships, that of friendship. Friendship involves numerous internal goods but can also sometimes produce external goods, as when a friend informs us of a bargain or an opportunity. Yet to regard friendship as a social institution geared to the production of external goods is to fail to understand the nature of friendship, and this failure is obvious if we consider the likely fortunes of someone who attempted to acquire friends solely with a view to attaining external goods from the relationship; we all recognise the insincerity of the sycophant or the fair-weather friend. Such a person would fail to attain friends because their starting point was of having an interest rather than of being interested, and our recognition of the insincerity would
come about precisely through their social failure to acknowledge the other person as a subject with a point of view, their refusal to allow their conduct to take this adequately into account, their failure to engage in genuine mutuality. The result of an individual’s attempts to form friendships depends very greatly on the initial cognitive posture involved, and hence what their resultant experience is will be to a large extent conditioned by how they initially oriented themselves to the other.16

These two points, that experience precedes conceptualisations and reasons about it, and that the manner of our initial cognitive comportment will impact upon what we experience, links to the difficulties with Wissenburg’s account of civic virtue. For the key point about the characteristic excellences is that they are learned through initial experience, immersion in practices; as such, the internal goals are learned through experience, through willingness to absorb without at first knowing the goals inherent to the practice [MacIntyre, 1981: 187–9]. Aristotle’s moral theory, in fact, was written explicitly for Greeks who already lived well; it was intended as an intellectual guide to enrich lives that were already good, not to answer the question of what worth there was in being good, as was the case for Plato.

This is no accident, for the point about practices is precisely that you cannot know what internal goals you will get out of them until you engage in them and learn about the worth of these goals. But by instrumentalising agency and motivation, by emphasising disconnection, Wissenburg robs us of the chance to have any motivation to engage in the practices to begin with. The necessary openness to experience is missing, for the characterisation of agency is one which assumes the existence of predefined instrumental motives for further external goals. It may (perhaps) be the case that economic liberalism ‘contains many elements that impede sustainability, but none of these threats seem invincible’ if we assume ‘the right kind of preferences’, but in the practical situation in which we find ourselves, we shall need some means of generating the right kind of preferences, and Wissenburg’s refusal to countenance any ‘interference by higher authorities in the process of preference formation’ [Wissenburg, 1998: 219–20] is less than encouraging. Moreover, given Wissenburg’s treatment of value and instrumentalism, it will not do simply to invoke eloquent appeals to virtue from the medieval era, a period in which religious bonds, strong local economic ties and an effective guild system of craft workers, all of which have now largely vanished from public consciousness in the Western world, helped keep restraining virtues alive [Wissenburg, 1998: 218–19]. Civic virtue cannot do the job which Wissenburg wants it to, for on his own conception of value and motivation, there is no obvious reason or cognitive space for wishing to learn to care about it to begin with.
It follows that, if we do indeed need to inculcate virtues of care in relation to the natural, we shall require both a cognitive reorientation and the existence of some nature in our lives to begin with to give an experiential base. I do not mean by this that we should or practically can radically repopulate the countryside from city regions for as Barry notes, this would be more than a little problematic [Barry, 1999: 256–61]. But Barry overlooks the alternative: if we cannot take the city people to nature, we can still reintroduce greater natural components to the city. This can be done, in the spirit of what was once called culture, by paying attention precisely to points of contact between the human and nonhuman, by emphasising connection and relationship as the point at which we must epistemologically, ethically and politically start, if only to know what our disconnected urban, consumerist selves might actually be missing. The use of ‘city-country fingers’ into the hearts of towns, the presence of more parks and green spaces, the encouragement of practices in city garden agriculture, the redesign of houses – all of these are options for Millite social experiment in reinvigorating our relationship to nature, and many of them would even be cheaper than yet more thousands of suburbs [Weston, 1994, 1996]. But we will not be able to do these things in contemporary society, we will not even know any clear experientially grounded reason to care, if we regard the preferences promoted by contemporary consumer society as given, and assume, as Wissenburg does, that a virtue which we have no reason to learn can protect us from the corporate promotion of preferences that the democratic state is not allowed to restrict.

NOTES

2. We are, of course, not alone in this. Similar efforts to find a middle ground are manifested in Marius de Geus’s concept of ‘ecological restructuring’ and John Barry’s democratised model of virtuous ecological stewardship. See De Geus [1996] and Barry [1999].
3. I confess to being slightly puzzled as to precisely what Wissenburg means by this, since much would seem to hang on what would be classified as interference; at one extreme, this injunction might rule out any regulation of advertising, state promotion of (for instance) traditional craft opportunities or perhaps even state education, but I suspect and hope that Wissenburg simply means that the state should not intervene in the formation of preferences that do not adversely impact on other assignable individuals or the common good.
4. I am not only thinking of familiar communitarian critiques of liberalism, but also attempts to recast liberal thought in a less physiphobic and disembodied form; see Zvesper [1993] and Stephens [1996].
5. That one per cent of value is not made by human labour is best explained by Locke’s not wishing to imply that God’s creation was wholly worthless, rather than by the argument that the one per cent stake restrains the extent of ownership powers, as claimed by Shrader-Frechette [1993: 78–80].
6. Locke states despite their occupation of fertile land, Native Americans ‘for want of improving it by labour, have not one hundredth part of the Conveniencies we enjoy: And a King of a large and fruitful Territory there feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day
GREEN LIBERALISMS: NATURE, AGENCY AND THE GOOD

7. Locke [1975: 263–4]. We should not worry here over Locke’s ‘I think improperly’ clause, for the reference is to will as being determined by uneasinesses (desires), and thus not ‘free’ in that sense.

8. Though the emphases are mine here, we should note that Chapter 21, from which both quotes are taken, is the longest in the Essay and is significantly titled ‘Of Power’.

9. Brecher [1998: 32–83]. Brecher argues that the liberal emphasis on wants is one that leads liberal thinkers to continually slide between wants as motivation and wants as justification for moral positions. Whilst I think his position rather overblown – Brecher, in neo-Kantian fashion, does not regard wants as having moral relevance at all – and unfair, most notably in his treatment of J.S. Mill, I believe his critique none the less deserves rather more attention than it has so far attained.

10. For an excellent critical summary of the problems of the separative self model in neoclassical economic theory, see England [1997].

11. For an extended scholarly treatment on the theme of Mill’s grounding in classical virtue, see Semmel [1984].

12. Mill reviled the moral complacency and passive consumerism of the wealthy, and strikingly attacked the manner in which the honest self-reliant craftsman was being driven out of business, due to the turbulence of industrial expansionism, by the capitalist con-man. ‘Success’, he complained, ‘in so crowded a field, depends not upon what a person is but upon what he seems: mere marketable qualities become the object instead of substantial ones, and a man’s labour and capital are expended less in doing anything, than in persuading other people that he has done it’ [Mill, 1977: 133].

13. See diZerega [1997: 7–8, 70].

14. This understanding comes out in connection with the ‘Formula of the Law of Nature’ in the Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals. While Kant saw physical nature as being primarily a realm of cause and effect, in which moral freedom must constantly struggle against the determinist push of the physical world and of inner impulse, he also seems to have believed that human nature, through its possession of reason, had other factors: human nature was capable of moral progression, of moving towards the goal of a better and morally more perfected world through discovery of the moral laws laid down by reason and obedience to them, and the ‘Formula of the Law of Nature’ was designed to bridge the gap between pure reason and the empirical (natural) realm of the senses. Accordingly, Kant too supposes that human nature has developmental potentialities which ought ideally to be actualised. In this sense, human nature at least is not a mere mechanism but can be seen as teleological, as what Kant later calls a ‘kingdom of nature’ [Paton, 1989: 30, 84–101].

15. This resonates with Leopold’s complaint about mass-market objections to wilderness recreation, that the ‘basic error in such argument is that it applies the philosophy of mass-production to what is intended to counteract mass-production’ [Leopold, 1987: 193–4].

16. For an extended treatment of this theme in relation to the natural world, see Weston [1994].

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