The Green only Blooms amid the Millian Flowers: A Reply to Marcel Wissenburg

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Having argued that formalistic modern liberalism is unpromising for expressing green values, I was highly engaged by Wissenburg’s sharp, astute defence of Green Liberalism. I am grateful for his clarifications and challenges, and am delighted to reply in turn.

First, let us clarify our political places. Wissenburg, largely rightly, says that we ‘seem to share a conviction that liberal democratic institutions and liberal values are here to stay and worth sustaining’. Reasons why we stand ‘on opposite sides of the Mill’ probably derive from different views about the current health of liberal democracy and the reasons behind such failings as it may have. Here, I am a green first and a liberal second. Whilst supporting liberal values, I see the green movement not merely as advocating sustainability but as opposing the resourcism of the neo-Weberian instrumental rationality manifested in the contemporary capitalist order, and the oft-diagnosed senses of disconnection in modernity. Empirically, my position on the current health of liberal democracy, and hence on its core values’ survival chances, is summarised by Monbiot:

The struggle between people and corporations will be the defining battle of the 21st century. If the corporations win, liberal democracy will come to an end. The great social democratic institutions which have defended the weak against the strong – equality before the law, representative government, democratic accountability and the sovereignty of parliament – will be toppled … Democracy will survive only if the people … rescue the state from its captivity. [Monbiot, 2000: 17] (emphasis added).

The emphasis indicates the need for promoting civic virtue to protect green and liberal values. This requirement, I believe, necessitates abandoning the expansionist, estranging neo-Weberian modes of rationality that emanate from the Lockean/Baconian tradition and are implicated in the corporate challenge’s rise, for these are undermining social liberalism, and instead restoring a rapprochement between reason and the passions of the sort found
in Mill’s notion of the autonomous creative individual. Any workable green/liberal synthesis therefore must reject Lockean assumptions with their antagonistic reason/passions, mind/body dualisms and offer alternatives appealing to the whole person. So a core disagreement exists, for I see no need to keep neo-Lockean liberals on board. Solutions, to my mind, will emerge by acknowledging that greens’ estrangement complaints reflect problems whose resolution will involve rethinking some Enlightenment assumptions about agency, rationality and property [Stephens, 1999, 2000]. These factors, along with his recognition of limits to growth and relational emphasis, make Mill the best bridge between green and liberal thought, for whilst he did not directly champion external nature, his advocacy of broad human flourishing uniquely allows a merger in which greens need not sell their souls. A truly green liberalism can only bloom amid Millian flowers.

So much for background. I must now, all too briefly, respond to some of Wissenburg’s key points.

(1) Black Boxes, Preferences and Human Nature

Wissenburg objects that his black box modelling of agency means that ‘we need no assumptions about human nature’. But though Wissenburg rightly says that some preferences will be overridden in a liberal polity, none the less we shall ultimately need some rationale for doing so, as well as some (ultimately naturalistic) explanation of why liberty of life is morally central. Wissenburg thinks he can avoid such demands, at least here, by pointing to impartial indifference about adiaphora in the liberal tradition and Hume’s undermining of the naturalism’s is-ought connection. However:

(i) Even indifference liberals are not indifferent about the reasons for the metaphysical importance, worth and definition of liberty itself; their indifference refers to impartiality about certain things and actions in the private realm, and these must be regarded as morally indifferent by reference to some set of reasons – generally, harmlessness – which will themselves need justification against an ethical background. Hence the issue remains troublesome.

(ii) Hume’s insistence on the is-ought division rests on a fact/value gap, itself dependent on a primordial subject-object division, and opposes the classic ethical naturalism which equates ‘natural’ with ‘good’. But my naturalism is Jamesian pragmatic naturalism, in which ‘pure experience’ is primordial and the gap between subject and object comes in only secondarily, because of its usefulness; we are not separated from the world as we are for Hume. Explanatory space is
restrictive, but in Jamesian naturalistic epistemology facts and values are primordially intermingled, and when we separate them, we do so because we choose to do so on certain evaluative criteria. This naturalism is fallibilist and impervious to Hume’s critique, since the subject-object and fact-value gaps are themselves undercut; it also avoids simply equating ‘natural’ with ‘good’, relying instead on the efficacy of values across the range of satisfactions and insisting on the natural interactive origins of values as necessary to make sense of them.

Thus neither Wissenburg’s defence of non-natural liberalism nor his Humean counterattack seem to yield the desired results. Though Wissenburg’s clarification over using preference language is welcome, we are still left with black boxes projecting given preferences onto the world, apparently with the anti-green and anti-nature implications diagnosed.

(2) Nature, Liberty and the Good

In my view, liberal justifications of the value of liberty will ultimately involve evaluating the worth of particular liberties, criteria for which will generate a broad regulative ideal of the human agent; this is unavoidable and legitimate. Hence liberalism must rely on a background account of the good as justification for individual liberties, but not attempt to force all individuals after a single ‘good’ mould. Liberalism allows multiple private ‘theories of the good’ because the act of making one’s own life and choices is good in the wider political sense, while the social choice of which liberties are to be made available will inevitably reflect the background ideal of human nature and development. The question then becomes which model best accommodates a truly green liberalism, and disagreement arises. Wissenburg apparently assumes that Mill-type theories embodying naturalistic regulative ideals of human development are implicitly authoritarian. In response:

(i) The criticism apparently conflates naturalism, perfectionism and the Good, then implies that any such regulative ideal will bring forth a Stalin. But if a regulative ideal of agency is inevitable in background justification, why not be open about the fact? Wissenburg understandably worries about promoting poetry over pushpin, but surely in this underlying area, ‘moral philosophy cannot avoid taking sides, and would-be neutral philosophers merely take sides surreptitiously’ [Murdoch, 2000: 78]. Thin theories become thick theories under justificatory pressure, and a healthy liberalism will
encourage the formation of preferences that are authentically the agent’s own against a backdrop of the widest possible ranges of potential fulfilment for them to select from. Narrow background ideals, especially where developmental visions are unavoidable (for example, education), simply leave the field clear for dominant economic interests to ‘intervene’ in ‘preference formation’ with their ideals, promoting consumption over creative questioning – as is happening [Weil, 1994].

(ii) Mill’s self-development philosophy is not authoritarian, as impressive scholarship surely demonstrates [Ten, 1980: 68–85; Donner, 1991: 92–187]. Recognising the integration, authenticity and spiritedness (thymos) of the human agent safeguards liberty and offers alternatives to Weberian manipulativeness [Zvesper, 1993: 95–8]. Social liberalism’s great achievements came with ‘thick’ theories – would these achievements have been possible otherwise? The world might look different indeed if slavery had been attacked by appeals to the enlightened self-interest of slave-holders. Similarly, the range of values in nature that may be defended, or even clearly articulated, by appeal to stripped-down quasi-Lockean models of agency may be very narrow.

(3) Virtue Genesis
I still feel Wissenburg’s subject–object division lends itself to a disconnected view of self and other, causing problems in deriving the necessary virtues. Wissenburg apparently thinks of obligations as emerging from relatively disembodied willed rational choice; given the number of consumptive/destructive acts and rejection of an eco-Leviathan, restraint principle strictures must rest on individual virtue as an obligation that one should act upon. But would this happen? An obligation will be most reliably adhered to if it is felt as such, which comes about through engagement in practices (for example, friendship). This takes us from virtue as obligation to virtue as motivation, and practically, the latter is usually necessary to ensure that the former is recognised and acted upon as obligatory. Hence, partly, my suggestion to build stewardship virtues by reconstructing cities, an initiative meant ideally to be started by local citizens rather than as a centralist imposition. (Notice also that this example served to illustrate my case for contact with nature, contact that brings nature into relationship with people in a manner that is wider than relating merely to a bundle of predefined use-values.) Aristotelian virtues are embedded in practices containing internal goals, which one appreciates only by acting first,
embedding oneself in the practice; reasons become clear in the learning. But this is the opposite derivation of obligation to that given by Wissenburg’s model in which abstract reason comes first, and so surely Wissenburg can only make his model work by reversing core assumptions, thus conceding that more contextual embodiment is necessary. It matters ‘not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it’ [Mill, 1984: 127], for only a certain range of manner of people will be motivated to do it at all.

Summing up, I stand with Wissenburg in adhering to core liberal values, in wishing for more Green Liberalism, and in hoping that our exchange has advanced the debate. We disagree, apparently, on the means of greening liberalism, on appropriate agency models, market effects, the current health of liberal democracy and the methods by which sustainability oriented virtues could be incarnated. Nonetheless, Wissenburg has launched a sturdy dreadnought on to the ocean of political theory; it will take some sinking, and readers can judge for themselves whether my critical torpedoes have damaged it.

NOTES

2. This suggestion is indebted to Callicott [1999: 244].

REFERENCES