3

The possibility of green liberalism

3.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I described the ideas that define liberal democracy and the set of ideas on which green theories, theories of nature, the environment, sustainability and ecology, are based. We have seen that the two are, to a large degree, prima facie compatible. I have already discussed some practical, real-world reasons to explain why there is a need to enrich liberal democratic thought with a green dimension. The main question that will be dealt with in this chapter is in which precise areas, on which issues, liberalism should be so enriched, and for which reasons.

Over the last 20-odd years, a set of issues collectively labelled as ‘the problem of sustainability’ or ‘the environmental problem’ has found its way into the public debate and private life, into economy, politics, science and philosophy. It has become one of the most serious challenges for modern liberal-democratic societies, as well as a widely discussed theme in several scientific and philosophical disciplines. Recently, this resulted in the first attempts to reconcile green concerns with existing democratic institutions (e.g. Doherty and De Geus 1996), focusing on the kinds of conceptions of democracy Greens (should) adhere to. Curiously enough, though, the environmental issue has only had a marginal influence on developments in one extremely important area of research: the mainstream paradigm in (moral and) political philosophy. This so-called liberal approach to political theory is concerned with the moral foundations of liberal democratic societies and, in turn, informs the practices of politicians, parties, policy-makers and voluntary organizations within these societies. The mainstream debate has mostly followed its own agenda, which is defined by the theoretical relevancy of subjects rather than by their practical urgency.

Theorists in this field are virtually silent on purely ecological issues, and in particular on the issue of nature’s intrinsic value (as opposed to external, instrumental or user value, value as a resource for human action; cf. Goodin 1992: 19 ff.).
ecological exploits of mainstream theorists are, as we shall see, limited to more or less incidental discussions, often literally in footnotes, of related issues like the just distribution of the world’s natural resources, obligations towards future generations and those towards animals.

In the first part of this chapter I shall be concerned with three descriptive questions, the first of which is how liberals (until recently) understood that aspect of ‘nature’ which we now call ‘environment’. I distinguish four phases: classical and ‘sensualist’ liberalism (Section 3.2) until the 1960s, modern-day Rawlsian liberalism between roughly 1960 and 1980, and latter-day ‘greening’ liberalism (Section 3.3). Section 3.3 also deals with my second question: what has changed in liberalism since the environmental crisis was invented? Although its answers are surprisingly radical, liberalism still deals with mostly marginal questions. I conclude that theorists in this field, with only one notable exception, are virtually silent on purely ecological issues, in particular on the issue of nature’s intrinsic value. Third, in Section 3.4, I have two goals:

(1) to sift out and list those ecological issues that are a real but neglected challenge to the liberalism of the future; and
(2) to indicate the directions in which the liberal debate should develop if it wants to address such ecological issues adequately.

Most of the topics I introduce here already rank high on the agenda of the competing ideology, ecologism – in particular the intrinsic value of nature, the representation of non-human interests, population growth and ecological reasons for limits to property rights. Yet the green agenda contains more than moral and theoretical problems. Basically, what unites all environmental theorists and activists from greyish green to deep green is the very down-to-earth question of survival. Many issues on the green agenda relate to the identification of the causes of environmental problems (or, if you will, the ecological crisis) and the design of solution strategies. But questions like these cannot be answered, cannot even be raised, without the existence of green issue number one: what is actually going on? What exactly are the practical environmental problems that threaten our and nature’s survival? A green liberalism that can give abstract answers to questions of means and ends is purely speculative if it simply has no problems to deal with. In Section 3.5, I therefore give a brief review of environmental problems as such and select a few of them for further consideration caused by the unusual political problems they may pose for green liberalism.

3.2 Classical and sensualist liberalism

Political philosophers are, by definition, interested in the polis, in the relation between government (court, proto-state, state) and civil society – and as an inevitable consequence also in humans, their mutual relations and their desires, needs, wants and preferences. What we today call ‘the environment’ plays virtually the same role in (classical) political philosophy as ‘the stars above’ or ‘the existence of extension and cognition’ or ‘the digestive system/the body’: it is one of the areas in which the Laws of Nature apply, laws that limit our (human) freedom to do as we like. The one role it does not play is that of a politically interesting subject, of something that somehow presents political problems or inspires some kind of policy.

The above is not only true for political philosophy in general but also for liberal political philosophy in particular. Before I go on to describe the classical liberal ideas of nature in more detail, let me first indicate what I would designate as a liberal political philosophy. It is clear that any such demarcation of a territory is done with the benefit of hindsight. John Locke, for example, did not describe himself as a liberal and hardly used the word liberal – at least not in the modern political sense of the word. Classical liberalism exists because modern liberalism does: classical liberalism is what modern liberals embrace as their intellectual ancestry.

Now modern liberalism itself is not typically one school of thought. Active American libertarians are, by European standards, liberals pur sang, yet they themselves use the term liberal to refer to – by American standards – leftist interventionists or, even more insultingly, as a synonym of social democracy. The former group would, both by European standards and by American academics (cf. Kymlicka 1990), in turn be described as liberal egalitarians. Finally, modern European social democrats also claim both to have a liberal streak and a partly liberal ancestry.

I shall not argue here about what would be the most or true liberal school either in politics or in political philosophy, but will instead adopt a liberal attitude and identify the family of ‘typically’ liberal ideas as that which defines liberalism; it is in the nature of a family concept to allow wide variations on a theme and not demand full devotion to any one particular note. Nor shall I bother to design a complete list of all the elements of the family liberalism. The following three criteria, a condensed version of the criteria for liberal democracy, are sufficiently uncontested to serve as a guide to identifying both classical and more modern versions of liberalism:

(1) Equality of citizens before the law and in politics
(2) Proportional equality of treatment by governing bodies, on the basis of morally relevant characteristics of citizens
(3) Civil liberties: freedom of information, opinion and expression; freedom of property, ownership and trade; protection of the private sphere and private life

To understand how and why modern liberals perceive environmental problems, we have to return to the aforementioned classical roots of liberalism. It is only there, before any such thing as the ozone layer was known to exist, that we can hope to find the unpolluted spirit of liberalism, the Weltanschauung that shapes (or shaped) the liberal’s conception of what is, and what is happening, in the world. At the very roots of liberalism, in what I call the first phase, we find that there was no such thing as an environment in its own right. In Lockeian times, the environment presented neither moral nor factual problems; the whole idea of an
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environment did not exist. Humanity did not live 'in' an environment, it lived instead on the verge of nature, just over the border. Nature had two roles to play in liberal thought: physically, it was an inexhaustible source of resources; intellectually, it was the incarnation of the laws of nature over which humankind had triumphed, which it had transcended.

A perfect illustration of both points is offered by liberal contract theories like Locke’s (Locke 1736; cf. Lee 1996), Pufendorf’s (Pufendorf 1991), even, to the degree that he adhered to one, Spinoza’s (Spinoza 1951, 1972). In all these, humankind has a special position in relation to metaphysical nature: it differs from the rest of the universe, either enough to rise above nature (Locke, Pufendorf) or enough to think it does (Spinoza), to create a realm of its own: society. The distinguishing feature of society is that it allows humans to be (or feel: Spinoza) free, within the bounds set by the laws of nature, to shape their own life. Society itself is, in a sense, a necessary product of nature: in building a society, humans follow the first law of nature that all things follow: the urge to survive, to persist in existence (conatus perseverandi: Spinoza). It is therefore not as if humans had fully thrown off the bonds of nature; there are no such bonds for them. Rather, they are endowed with a special gift that allows them to discover and – all in accordance with natural law – use the leeway that nature’s leaves gives them. This gift is an emotion, a ‘motivational force’, called reason. Reason allows them either to work out ways of bending the laws of nature to their advantage, for example by founding societies (Locke, Pufendorf), or – by means of societies – by discovering ways of transcending this very illusion of grandeur (Spinoza) and be reunited with nature.

It is fascinating to see how many of the now established elements of liberalism were already present in this embryonic phase of its development. Note, for example, the crucial role of reason: in principle, all humans have it by virtue of being human. Here lies the beginning of arguments for the political equality and influence of citizens, for the individual as the source of all political authority, for the priority of private over state interests. Note also the role of nature as a leash – the concept allows that for some the leash can be longer than for others. The more we depend for our survival on others, the less way we have. Here lies the source of first- phase liberalism’s arguments for the exclusion of (half-wild, emotionally retarded, rational”nderdeveloped) women and children, of (ditto) criminals, of employees. Here also are the criteria that liberals would later attack in their struggle against exclusion. Note, finally, how humankind’s transcending nature by means of reason makes humans free, in a negative sense, to choose a purpose in life, a notion of the good life, a plan of life: reason has turned instincts into (as Karl Popper called it) taboo, and taboo into the absence of guiding principles. Reason alone is insufficient when it comes to sketching out the individual’s good life: she has to design that herself. In this last lies the reason for early liberalism’s radical emphasis on tolerance.

What is particularly fascinating to see is how early contractarian liberals apparently perceived the part of nature outside their own realm. In every description of the ‘state of nature’, two aspects are balanced against one another: the nasty and brutish, and the useful and benevolent. Either one can serve to help explain the genesis of society. If humans live alone, in that unhealthy state where dog eats dog and human robs human, the urge to survive will cause a revolution and point the way towards cooperation and away from want; if they live communally in more friendly circumstances, that same urge will incite reform and show them how to better their position. Nevertheless, both aspects are present in any one contract theory; both are recognized as faces of this Janus, nature.

Nature, therefore, is two things at the same time. On the one hand, in its friendly aspect, it provides for all our wants, and it provides for them incessantly – it is an ever-flowing horn of plenty, an indepletable collection of resources. On the other, it is wild, raw, unconquered, untamed – we have to cultivate it, tame and transform it into something edible, drinkable, wearable, smokeable, readable, in general: useful. In fact, not only can humankind use nature to the fullest extent necessary – it also has a ‘right’ to do so, a natural right in the pursuit of the first law of nature, i.e. the quest for survival. This most basic law of nature serves as the major arguments in the legitimation of property: without the concept of ‘nature’, our modern understanding of property would have been impossible. It also explains the need for a social contract: namely, to protect each individual’s equal (natural) right to use the resources available in the pursuit of their private conception of the best road to first survival and then the good life.

Classical liberalism recognizes only one essential distinction in nature: the line dividing reasonable and unreasonable beings. Like medieval philosophers, liberals still see a hierarchical difference between humans, animals and plants, a hierarchy often still crowned with angels and, the non plus ultra of reason, God. Yet this hierarchy is at best metaphysically relevant, never ethically or politically. The fact that animals stand halfway between plants and humans is not a reason to give them a special status: being unfree and beyond ethics, they are as much part of nature-at-resource as cabbages are.

The period and thought of the French Revolution lead to the birth of two new philosophies that would in time transform liberal political philosophy into what it is now. One is typically a sister of the liberal sceptics: towards religious and in general ‘higher’ truth: utilitarianism. It rejected all notions of such moral criteria and instead (super)imposed the positivist idea of the purely human good: the subjective experience of pleasure and pain. Even liberals who did not accept the conclusions of utilitarianism sometimes accepted as a premise that humans and animals did have something in common, something that was morally relevant: sensual experiences. The second ideology was a typical reaction to, but in a sense compatible with, positivism and utilitarianism: romanticism, with its love for the aesthetic and emotional in general and nature in particular. It allowed liberals – particularly Americans, by the way – to make the first steps towards the recognition of the uniqueness of a landscape and its elements and so on to the idea that some forms of natural capital are simply non-substitutable. (Note, however, that romanticism itself is not necessarily either liberalism-friendy or ecologist-friendly. Its glorification of an older, more simple way of life can just as easily be...
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turned against the modern, urban, industrial life associated with liberalism, and its particular brand of love of the natural life may support farmers and (aristocratic) hunters more than activists and hunt saboteurs.)

It is not easy to say whether liberalism absorbed elements of utilitarianism and romanticism, or whether utilitarianism became liberal and romantic. We might say that T.H. Green illustrates the first hypothesis and J.S. Mill the second. At any rate, the result was the arial of 'positive' liberalism, social liberalism, next to a more hardliner's 'negative', political liberalism. Moreover, liberalism in both versions, though the latter less than the former, now offered room for moral consideration of the welfare of animals and the protection of nature. It is not coincidental that this period saw the emergence of the RSPCA and similar organizations (cf. Tester 1991: 88 ff.) as well as the first nature reserves. Even the unromantic consequences of progress, described at its most horrid by Malthus and experienced most deeply by those living in the polluted centres of British industry, were reflected in liberal thought. It is in Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* that we first encounter the idea of economic limits to growth and find arguments in favour of a steady state economy (Mill 1965). Note, however, that the latent tension between the endangered Nature The Beautiful and nature as an inexhaustible collection of resources remained precisely that: latent. After Mill, liberalism kept virtually silent about environmental issues.

Liberalism in this second phase is far less interested in the role of the laws of nature, either in general or particularly when property rights were at stake. Especially after the high tide of romanticism has past, in the days of Popper and Hayek, the interest in nature wanes again. The focus of attention shifted to political and economic matters, to the threat of totalitarianism and so forth. It was typically committed to a more utilitarian assessment of the use of private property and a more secular, even democratic foundation of rights.

3.3 The greenning of liberalism

In the course of the 1960s, liberal political philosophy was awakened like a sleeping beauty by the kiss of Prince Charming, the legitimisation crisis of that time. Until that moment, political philosophy - at least in the Anglo-Saxon world where liberalism had its den - had been dominated by the analytical linguistic approach. In 1972, one of the people who contributed to the development of a liberal response to the legitimisation crisis, the until then virtually unknown John Rawls, published the book that would reshape the outline of liberal and indeed nearly all political philosophy, *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1972). Soon afterwards, it was already described as the authoritative statement of the agenda of political philosophy (Nozick 1974), and by 1980 Rawls had been promoted to the rank of 'saint' (as allegedly said by Thomas Nagel). A new paradigm had emerged: the Rawlsian tradition, also known as liberal egalitarianism (Kymlicka 1990).

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Although any selection is arbitrary, we could say that among Rawls’ critical admirers, Bruce Ackerman (Ackerman 1980, 1983), Ronald Dworkin (Dworkin 1978, 1985), the early Brian Barry (Barry 1965) and Thomas Nagel (Nagel 1986, 1991) stand out as the most renowned representatives of liberal egalitarianism. Robert Nozick (Nozick 1974), James Buchanan (Buchanan 1975) and David Gauthier (Gauthier 1985, 1986) are Rawls’ best known libertarian opponents. Together, they represent the liberal conception but, since they actually had little conception of it, even more so the liberal reception of the idea of the environment as it emerged in the 1960s.

We notice two things when we consider this - at least in the Anglo-Saxon world - mainstream paradigm in political philosophy. One is that two of the three central topics of debate are extremely familiar: the issue of the toleration of different lifestyles and, due particularly to Nozick’s critique of Rawls’ solution to the former problem, the issue of (self-)ownership rights. Being liberals, even though with diverging tastes and different deeper reasons, all mainstream authors defend the view that a moral standard for the common good should not play a dominant role in the design and institutions of a society, even if there were one or if it were possible for one to be discovered.  It is instead the task of the political institutions of society to safeguard and sometimes promote a both maximum and equal freedom for individuals to pursue the life (in Rawls’s authoritative terms: reasonable plan of life) of their choice and the good of their choice.

At this point, a third topic of debate is introduced: distributive justice. Where the idea of equal freedom is translated in positive terms as equal opportunities, equal resources, equal welfare, in general as equal meaningful rights – an idea inherited from nineteenth-century liberalism and socialism — the need may arise to (re)distribute the fruits of the unfair initial distribution in life of talents and handicaps. And here, almost automatically, the question of the legitimacy of (self-) ownership arises: how certain are we of our rights if the least inequity in our own or other people’s innate capacities may void them? Why should the (disposable) fact that the fruits of our labour may be (individually) undeserved imply that these fruits automatically become collective property? Does not redistribution imply taxation, and would taxation not mean taxing talents rather than efforts, since the talented will either be forced to work for others or refrain from using their talents? Is not distributive justice then at the same time a kind of slavery, a kind of collective ownership or ownership by the weak and lazy of the talented and active?

Another noteworthy point with regard to mainstream liberal political philosophy is that it discusses (what were and in most cases still are) current affairs - the kinds of issues that attracted the attention of the general public rather than the academic world. The list of popular political questions included international peace, international justice, women’s rights and also, for the first time, the environment. I must immediately amend this, though: at least the environmental questions that were discussed, even though related to issues that are now recognized as environmental issues, were neither induced by a genuine environmental awareness nor were they intended to address the agenda and concerns of environmentalists and...
ecologists. I do not think it is exaggerated to say that the 'environmental' concerns of mainstream liberals were limited to the following four issues only: pollution, animal rights, the global distribution of resources and obligations to future generations (cf. for a similar conclusion Taylor 1993). And neither of these four was seen as a typically environmental problem or even as having an environmental dimension.

Consider first the discussion of animal rights. The aim of authors like Nozick and Ackerman in discussing the status of animals had nothing to do with biodiversity or the imminent extinction of species, nor with the distribution between human and animal of access to resources, nor with the treatment of individual animals, nor even, finally, with an attempt to prove that humankind would be uniquely fit or destined to own and use nature. Instead, animals served the intra-theoretical purpose of marking off humans as one category and identifying the traits that would make humans and human interests morally and politically relevant. Animals served to illustrate and support the principle of political and social equality. The remarkable fact that distinctions were less easy to draw than might be hoped did, however, result in the recognition that humans could actually have moral obligations towards animals – a discovery that would, in time, make the issue of animal rights itself fashionable in philosophical circles.

Some liberals have written if not in support of, then at least about, the popular perception of an unjust distribution of power, wealth, the standard of life, opportunities and access to resources on a global scale. In recent years, this same topic has been put on the green agenda, where it has been recognized as a social, political and economic problem, every possible solution of which will have far-reaching environmental consequences. Not so in 1970s philosophical liberalism: there is no attention for or recognition of the environmental dimension. Even more distressing, from the ecologist's point of view, is the fact that whatever solutions liberals defended were solutions between nations. The sovereignty of nations was no point of debate; it seemed that there could be no reason to overrule national interests, to overcome the division of the world in states as elementary units or to independently justify supranational, even global, policy-making institutions. (Cf. in particular Rawls 1972.) Furthermore, (post-)Rawlsian liberals have discussed, actually at great length, one of the great issues in green discourse and one of the strongest grounds for environmental concern and action: our obligations to future generations. Yet the environmentalist will again be disappointed when discovering in precisely which way the topic was addressed. In Rawls's A Theory of Justice, the existence of obligations to (some) future generations is taken for granted, and in fact few have ever dared to question this assumption, but the resulting 'savings principle of justice' was typically designed with the idea of perpetual economic growth at the back of the mind; Rawls made no provision for diminishing growth or worse. In fact, it seems that his savings principle only recognizes obligations to future generations in fair weather. Other liberals spent even fewer thoughts, though perhaps more words, on future generations (Nozick 1974; Ackerman 1980).

Incidentally, future generations are also the subject of an at first sight rather academic debate on population size inspired by Derek Parfit's work in this field (Parfit 1984). What makes it look academic (as always: to green) is that it bears no direct relation to the green issue of overpopulation and population control. Instead, it deals with the question whether we have a duty to produce happy offspring rather than simply offspring, whether causing people to exist or causing them not to exist can be intrinsically good or bad, and how the size of future populations should be related to average or overall happiness. All this may indeed seem rather abstract, and yet, as I shall argue in Chapter 6, Parfit's ideas will probably be more welcome to greeners than the views of non-utilitarian liberals who must focus on the consequences of population policies at the level of individuals.

Finally, in the last 20 to 30 years, pollution seeped in as an interesting topic for liberals – especially, I should like to stress, in the unlikely regions of libertarianism (Redbard 1973; Nozick 1974; Buchanan 1975). Yet once more, the approach to the problem is thoroughly un-green. What is at stake for libertarians is the possibility of a trade-off between a hypothetical right to pollute as a consequence of the unquestioned right to manufacture goods, and an equally indisputable right on the part of victims of pollution not to have their freedoms infringed by the activities of neighbours. Notice, however, that the libertarian presumption is that pollution is an illegitimate burden that can somehow be compensated for, and that in fact the possibility of compensation for pollution is a special case of the almost universal faith in the substitutability of resources. Notice, moreover, that pollution itself does not seem to be the problem (since it can apparently be counterbalanced); the problem lies rather in harmonizing incompatible rights.

If we want to assess the contribution of (post-)Rawlsian liberal political philosophy to the debate on the environmental crisis, we must take account of the good as well as the bad and ugly. It is undoubtedly true that liberals have, up to the 1980s or even 1990s, either forgotten or neglected most topics of green political debates, and that they have taken up others only with the greatest reluctance. For one, the few environmental problems they discussed were not recognized as such. For another, the whole range of newly developed green ideas seems to have passed by unnoticed: there is no mention of the intrinsic value of nature, no notion of the possibility that economic growth may end one day, nor of ideas like the depletion of resources, physical limits to growth, sustainability or carrying capacity – not even of the protection of nature reserves. Frankly, it seems as if the expulsion of metaphysics from twentieth-century 'decent' academic philosophy had totally eliminated the metaphysical concept of nature that was so prominent in classical liberalism (cf. Stephens 1996: 4, 11), and that the radical separation between philosophy and empirical science had done the same for the physical phenomenon nature.

On the other hand, no matter how marginal the questions may have been with which liberal political philosophy wrestled, the answers it formulated do in fact have very profound and radical consequences. For example, it is now virtually impossible for a philosophical liberal to design a metric of distributive justice that does not at least address the issue of the interests of future generations, even in bad times. Moreover, liberals have opted for what is sometimes called the similarity
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approach in ethics, according to which the moral relevancy of a subject depends on its having relevant traits in common with a reference group (immigrants with foreigners, animals with humans, etc.). Apart from serving as a means of supporting equality of humans and the equal concern due to them, this opens the door for arguments in favour of the protection of non-human nature – and these arguments do not necessarily have to be utilitarian in nature. Next to this, the debate on the Parfit People Problem may well have provided ways to discuss the extremely sensitive and emotional issue of population policy. And finally, with pollution liberalism has recognized the existence of burdens other than thieves and tax persons, thus opening itself up to questions of substitutability and, ultimately, sustainability.

The one great exception to the rule that liberal political philosophers are not intrinsically interested in environmental matters is Brian Barry (Barry 1989, 1993, 1995a, 1995b) whose work for the last decade has focused both on the – among liberals – fashionable green issues, albeit at greater length, and on some of the less popular questions: the limits to growth, the anthropocentric versus eocentric approach to the value of nature, and the related question of whether nature has intrinsic or instrumental value. Recently, Barry has started on a new project: the design of a liberal theory of distributive justice for a sustainable society. For a long time, Barry seemed to be the only established mainstreamer who took ecological issues seriously. In the last three or four years, however, he has at last long been joined by other established figures like John Gray and David Miller. Moreover, John Rawls’s reinterpretation of his own theory of justice in Political Liberalism includes a new justification of his savings principle for justice between generations (Rawls 1993: 274) in terms of mutual advantage rather than the (contingent) love of people for their own offspring. As I show in a later chapter, Rawlsian liberals may well discover that the implications of this on the surface minor change in Rawl’s view on justice between generations fundamentally changes the focus of mainstream theory in ways that make it far more open to environmental issues. Now that green liberalism is no longer the interest of just one eccentric, Phase Four has begun. And yet, some things are still missing.

3.4 The green problems of liberalism

Liberalism has come a long way in accepting the need to address environmental issues, but it has taken quite some time to do so, and it still has a long way to go. If we want to assess the progress made so far, we must first recognize that the debate on the implications of the limits of growth thesis and its policy principle, sustainability, has only just begun. In this section, I consider the directions in which the debate on the greening of liberalism is likely to develop.

First, there is the issue of sustainability. During the past decade, debates about environmental issues have been increasingly put in terms of sustainability, so much

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so that nearly everyone on the spectrum from very shallow green conservationism to very deep Green ecologism now prefers to use this term rather than anything as politically sensitive as ecological, environmental or green. It must be admitted that the notions of sustainability and its dynamic counterpart, sustainable development, are very well suited to proliferation on such a wide scale. The often quoted and more or less authoritative definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Report is open enough to allow for diverging interpretations:

to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. (World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future (1987), quoted in Nelissen, Van der Straten & Klinken 1997: 282)

Moreover, those diverging interpretations are themselves in turn open to further interpretation (cf. e.g. Eden 1996: 158 E.; see also Dobson (forthcoming) for a very lucid in-depth analysis of ‘sustainability’). We should, however, not lose sight of the fact that sustainability is not a non-committal term; it still has some substantive meaning. This substance, the idea that there are limits to growth and obligations to future generations, is exactly what is needed to put environmental issues on the liberal agenda: without these physical limits, only moral reasons could draw attention to the relation between humans and environment – and liberal neutrality might well consider the latter an issue for private rather than public deliberation. Then again, even this core idea can be interpreted in several ways. One relates to the notion of the Earth’s limited carrying capacity: there are only so many people it can feed, there is only so much pollution it can absorb. Another is in terms of economic development: there is a moment at which the costs, including or even excluding external environmental costs, of producing goods will rise above what a national economy can afford. Yet another points to the social limits to growth: there is only so much progress, change, flexibility, artificiality and alienation a society can bear. And then there is the geological interpretation: there is a physical limit to the amount of resources that can provide the energy for production, a limit to the amount of resources that can be transformed into goods, and a limit to the achievements that can be made in the field of increasing the efficiency of production processes. These and other interpretations have still not been adequately differentiated, not have they been introduced separately in liberal discourse.

We may also expect the introduction of the notion of limits to growth and resources, and with it that of sustainability, to lead to questions of a substantive normative nature. A sustainable society need not be one big Yellowstone Park – we can imagine a worldwide version of Holland stuffed with cows, grain and greenhouses, or even a global Manhattan without the Park to be as sustainable and for many among us as pleasant as the first. Hence, a greener liberalism will have to define more clearly what kind of sustainability, what kind of world, it aims for.

Next, modern liberalism is still anxious to avoid any attack on the sanctity of individual plans of life, but this issue may well become unavoidable. Usually, the
green view of sustainability recognizes three aspects: a supply side (resources), a
demand side (consumers) and the distributive structure of society (see Section 1.6).

To warrant sustainability, all these three aspects are relevant. The second aspect sug-
gests solutions in terms of population size, but it is notoriously difficult to justify
binding measures from a liberal point of view, as we shall see. The third suggests
that we look for fair distribution schemes that maximally satisfy legitimate demands.

Any solution, any set of distributive principles Q and criteria for the legitimacy of
demands P that we were to propose, should be general in two senses: it is to be
applicable to any morally permissible permutation of the set of possible conceptions of
‘resources’ (parameter 1) and to any corresponding permutation of ‘consumers’
(parameter 2). But the problem is we can never guarantee that there will not be
too many people to satisfy even their most basic needs, let alone to satisfy these
fairly. Hence, liberals seem destined to depend on one of two remaining strategies.
The first is that of technological and geological solutions to the resources problem
(parameter 1), a strategy that is both undependable (unpredictable) and question-
able, at least by the standards of many environmentalists, who claim that uncrip-
ted reliance on technocratic solutions is what brought about our present environmental
problems in the first place. The only remaining alternative is to preach austerity, i.e.
restrain the number or amount of people’s preferences, desires, elements of
plans of life, or whatever we want to call them. Since one of the main aims of
liberal democracy is to promote the liberty of life rather than restrict it, this may
also prove to be a hazardous route to salvation. At least theoretically, green liberals
may therefore be thrown back after all on either population control or on ways of
influencing the genesis of preferences, the way in which people’s desires and
plans of life are generated.

In the context of this problem, we should also consider the unique nature of
environmental problems. One of the odd things about sustainability and the more
general concept of environment is not just that it can serve to bring the most diverse
problems under the same heading (see the next section) but that it actually is made
up of all sorts of interconnected problems. At the very least, environmental prob-
lems consist of waste material passing on from consumer to soil to water to sea
to air and on to natural resources or straight on to the consumer. Problems of
sustainability cross all borders between media, ecosystems and political entities.

The interconnectedness of environmental problems thus further limits the possi-
bility for liberal democratic regimes to warrant sustainability — and it raises the
question whether the division of responsibilities over states is compatible with
policies aimed at sustainability.

Then there is an issue that so far has escaped the attention of both greens and
(most) liberals, due to, on the one side, the green preoccupation with what has
to be done to ensure the survival of humankind and the planet, and on the other
side the trenches that have been dug between liberal egalitarians and libertarians.
The issue I am referring to here is that of the legitimacy of property rights.

Environmental issues make us aware, more than ever, of the shaky foundations
on which the legitimacy of property (whether collective or private) rests. Consider

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the so-called Lockean proviso on which, in the grey past, the now unquestioned
legitimacy of property was founded: a property right to a resource x requires that
‘enough and as good’ of x is left for others. The Lockean proviso (Locke 1733)
presumes that resources are by definition abundantly available, whereas modern
variants of it, as defended by e.g. Robert Nozick (Nozick 1974), presume that
there can be abundant (in a sense infinite) compensation for stock reductions, which
in turn presupposes the possibility of infinite recycling. The limits to growth have
brought these two (and other) theories of legitimate acquisition into really quite
serious difficulties. If resources are no longer abundantly available and if the modern
alternative, abundant compensation for stock reductions (Nozick 1974) is also ex-
cluded since it presupposes the possibility of infinite recycling — then what remains?

The point to note here is not just that these problems may only apply to other
(almost forgotten) justifications of private property — it is also that they apply to
justifications for property in general. If we can share Robert Nozick’s observation
that the absence of a justification for private ownership does not automatically
justify collective ownership (Nozick 1974), we see that any attempt to defend
collective ownership will meet precisely the same problems. (For an evaluation of
Locke’s proviso as an alternative route towards green liberalism, see Dobson
forthcoming.)

Some liberals have also affirmed the existence of a problem in regard to the
source of value (i.e. intrinsic/instrumental) and in regard to its attribution (human,
mammal, animal, plant, rock, landscape). Yet few have seriously discussed it so
far. This is odd in view of the immense effects that the recognition of even a very
limited degree of moral relevancy of mammals must have on political (e.g. dis-
tribution) decisions — not to mention the repercussions of the recognition of the
intrinsic value of all nature, as deep ecocentrics would have it.

Finally, there is an urgent need for a metadiscourse on green liberalism. The four
relatively neglected topics mentioned in this section, plus the recent contributions
mentioned in Section 3.3, do not seem to form a coherent story. So far, it is
more like a set of possibly mutually exclusive amendments to the existing body
of literature on liberal distributive justice. What is needed now is a decision on
which topics should receive the greater part of our attention and which should be
set aside for a while as being of secondary importance. In making this decision,
we should for once not be guided by what is theoretically interesting nor by the
mood of the day, by what the competitor, ecologism, propagates as urgent. The
green agenda for liberals has so far been dictated by environmentalists and hence
determined by an ecological, not a liberal, ontology or Weltanschauung. What
green liberalism needs most of all is a perspective of its own, or at the very least
a critical reassessment of the ecological ontology. We must also decide which
solution strategy to follow: the inductive route of dealing with separate questions
until some kind of status quo has been established, or the deductive route of first
designing grand theories of sustainable or ecological liberalism and only then
applying them to particular questions. The first route seems more practical (it is
in fact the route I follow in this book), since any answer to any of the relevant
'particular' questions can immediately help philosophical liberalism confront ecological challenges. Nevertheless, it would be a great help if a second Rawls appeared with an agenda-setting *A Theory of Green Justice*.

### 3.5 AIDS, women and deforestation

The title of this section is first a tribute to two female colleagues who one day had to listen to a male colleague describing the three major problems of our times as 'AIDS, women and deforestation' and had trouble convincing the speaker that his was not the luckiest choice of words. It is also, secondly, a good *pars pro toto* label for the subjects on the green (activists') agenda: in principle, virtually everything is on it, since virtually every issue can be given an ecological twist. Smoking, for instance, is an environmental issue because it involves the creation of biological resources, their transformation into consumer goods and subsequently into waste products. Sport is an environmental issue because it involves the use of space for facilities that would perhaps not be necessary if we lived a more healthy life. This book itself is an environmental problem unless the efforts that went into writing, printing and publishing it can be proven to be, on the whole, beneficial to the environment — provided we first establish that environmental consequences can be measured in terms of costs and benefits. Racism is an environmental issue, since it involves unequal access to resources and discrimination of possibly more environmentally sane cultures and habits. Even pure reflection can be an environmental issue — it is reflection that brought humankind from the stone age into the age of computer technology. Not every subject has to be on the green agenda; not every greenish confession requires faith in the all-permeating omnipresence of the Green Idea. Nevertheless, everything could be on it.

There is a kind of shortlist of environmental problems on which all environmentalists and ecologists seem to agree. These are what I call first order problems. They relate to purely physical problems in which the hand of humankind is visible as a cause and effect become visible as possibly irreversible changes in nature. Disagreements begin when second order problems are introduced, i.e. when the search for explanations and deeper causes begins. It is the exact mix of explanations in terms of social and political circumstances, moral ideas, technological modes of production, discourses and subtexts, epocho and paradigms that determine, first, which other topics could be added to the list of first order problems, and second how first order problems are thought to arise. On the list of second order problems, we find items like uncontrolled economic growth, inefficient use of resources, Third World poverty, military expenses, population growth, increased use of energy and increased consumption in general (luxury goods as well as food), and deeper down moral deficiencies like greed, lack of concern, anthropocentrism, materialism, consumerism, lack of spirituality, a temporal bias in favour of present generations.

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We should also distinguish a level of third order problems to explain second order and hence first order judgements — which implies that even the shortlist of first order problems is contestable. First and second order problems cannot be recognized, let alone ordered, without a deeper theory, a *Weltanschauung* that makes them problems. The shortlist of first order problems which I am about to introduce, for instance, lists issues about which an orthodox stoic probably could not care less. But then, greens are not stoics. Here, I shall ignore second and third order differences of opinion. The shortlist, which is derived partly from Albert Weale's inventory (*Weale* 1992: 4) and partly from Bosselmann's (*Bosselmann* 1992: 344), is intended to reflect a *communitas opinio* among greens, not a general truth. I mention them not because they are problems but because they are perceived as problems.

**Resources management** and subcategories
- depletion of non-renewable natural resources (energy and others)
- extinction of animal and plant species
- eutrophication
- deforestation
- erosion
- desertification
- water shortage
- damages to ecosystems
- diminishing biodiversity
- treatment of animals

**Pollution** and subcategories
- poisoning of flora and fauna
- soil
- groundwater
- rivers
- seas and oceans
- air
- acidification
- ozone depletion
- global climate change (e.g. greenhouse effect), subdivided into:
  - global warming
  - rising sea level
- changes in flora, fauna and ecosystems as a whole

Not all these problems are necessarily relevant from a liberal point of view, at least not initially. What constitutes a problem for liberal democracies is determined by the list of criteria developed in Chapter 1. On that basis, resource management and pollution issues will only be real problems if they currently endanger the process of reconciling and satisfying individual preferences. It is not until we can establish that liberal democratic systems have to provide opportunities for their continued existence that the time horizon can be expanded to include the future and from there on perhaps future generations and non-human interests.
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To us, reflecting on the possibility of green liberalism, the topics on this list are all relevant, albeit in a different way. They can serve as test cases in assessing how green liberalism can be in the eyes of greens. Yet at the same time, it is far less important to find a liberal democratic answer to these concrete environmental problems than it is to determine the positions liberal democracy should take on the more abstract questions introduced in Chapter 2. Answers to the latter type of question determine whether practical problems are problems at all, and in which sense they are problems— from a liberal point of view. It is only then that it makes sense to discuss liberal democratic solutions to environmental problems. After all, solutions to practical problems demand rules and criteria for success; otherwise environmental policy would be guided by chance. Philosophy is prior to good policy.

In dealing with these theoretical questions in the next six chapters, I shall let myself be guided by the notion of sustainability or sustainable development. Sustainability helps us to order our questions. As noted before, it is built on two premises: that future generations are recognized as relevant, and that the existence of limits to growth are recognized. It also organizes the choice of solution strategies into three groups: supply, demand and distribution. I shall use these ideas as working hypotheses to see if liberal democracy can be sustainable, thereby determining which positions liberals should take on the green issues of Chapter 2, and only then, having established that liberal democracy can be sustainable to a considerable degree and that it must be aimed at sustainability, discuss whether this will also make liberalism really green.

It follows that it is not my primary objective to find solutions to practical environmental problems. My aim is to indicate that solutions are possible. Consequently, I shall only discuss some of the issues on the shortlist, I shall discuss them only incidentally and only to the degree that they pose problems of a politico-philosophical nature.

3.6 Intermezzo

Having reached the end of three chapters of often exhaustingly abstract groundwork, this is a perfect moment to sit back and rekindle the spirit. In this section, I want to recapitulate what I set out to do, what (little) has been done so far, and what still awaits us.

I set out to discover whether liberalism could go or be 'green'. The foundation has now been laid and the results can be summarized in a few paragraphs. First, I have given a description of the normative, prescriptive or moral aspect of liberal democracy. It was not a description of how liberal democracies actually work, nor one in terms of the ideals that should lie behind practice. The former would tell us little about what the morality of liberal democracy could allow, the latter depends on the special perspective that alternative schools in liberal political philosophy, from libertarian to social democratic, hold to be right. My model was instead formulated in terms on which these schools should be able to agree: that is, in terms of the ideals that actually lie behind liberal democracy and at the same time actually describe the moral minimum on which liberal theorists agree in principle. This part of our analysis resulted in a list of 'stringent conditions of liberal democracy'.

Next, I mapped the field of green, environmental or ecological theory. I distinguished four levels of green debate (metaphysics, ethics, politics and policies), described the issues and possible positions at each of these levels, and deselected some positions that turned out to be prima facie incompatible with the conditions of liberal democracy. Hence, we have delineated an area, or in green terms discovered an ecological niche, within which 'green liberalism' might find the right soil to flourish.

Last, I considered the evolution of liberalism itself, to find that it lost most of its metaphysical interest in questions of nature over the course of three centuries: that it gained some new ideas with regard to more probe questions of an ethical, political and policy nature; and that it nevertheless remained silent on green issues— until very recently. Given that there are good reasons to develop a green perspective for liberalism, given that there is (virtually) none so far, and given that there is room for such a view, I formulated a green agenda for liberalism. I made two lists of issues with which green liberalism will have to deal. One concerned green issues that might ask for fundamental changes in liberal theory, the other specified the purely physical environmental problems to which a viable green liberal political theory and system should have some kind of answer.

In the following six chapters I shall try to deal with this green agenda, following the four levels of debate described in Chapter 2, but postponing most metaphysical issues until the very end. Chapter 4 discusses ethics. In particular, it deals with abstract questions of value: what is value, what are its origins, is it or can it be intrinsic to an object or entity, external or both? Liberal democracy's attitude towards nature will vary depending on the answers to these questions, from brute exploitation if the value of nature depends on human preferences to scrupulously respectful trusteeship if it has intrinsic value. Or so it would seem. I shall however argue, among other things, that the notion of intrinsic value should be abandoned, possibly for theoretical reasons but certainly and at the very least for practical reasons. Maybe the idea that nature has intrinsic value can be reduced to a form of external value, but it can certainly be represented as such, as something that is valued by those who either create or discover value in the world: individuals guided by their plans of life.

Chapter 4 also deals with two issues that immediately follow from the discussion of the nature of value. One is substitutability, i.e. whether or not one 'vehicle of value', say an old chestnut tree, can be replaced by others, say, a painting or hologram of the tree in a museum, a load of furniture, a series of poplars. I argue that a conception of the value of (elements of) nature as having external, even instrumental value cannot in any way serve to discard the notion of substitutability,
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but neither can it exclude the possibility that some or even all parts of nature are inestimable. The other question is 'who counts?' – which entities deserve which kind of protection against which kinds of interference with their existence? The latter question will be answered in terms of formal rights (cf. Chapter 1). Roughly and slightly romantically put, my conclusion will be that as long as there are creatures for whom parts of nature are experienced as inestimable, liberal democracy has a principal obligation to protect nature against any kind of destructive exploitation.

Chapter 5 is about politics and discusses principles of justice or, to put it very formally, the principles that should rule the acquisition, attribution and distribution of (formal) rights by and over the recipients governed by liberal democratic political institutions. The two most important ideas I introduce here are (1) trilateral obligations between previous, present and future generations and (2) the restraint principle. The first is a special way of representing the notion of obligations to future generations; in fact, it is a modification of one of John Rawls's recent amendments to his original Theory of Justice. It connects the survival of society and social cooperation to the idea that society is a scheme of cooperation among different generations existing next to one another, and combines this with an obligation to treat the next generation no worse than you would want the previous one to have treated you. From this and a few auxiliary theses, the restraint principle for the distribution of formal rights follows, according to which every physical object should be dealt with as if it were inestimable, at least as such as humanly possible. Against our expectations, this leaves us – still within a liberal democratic frame of thought – with a far better protection of nature or natural capital against exploitation, substitution and extinction than could have been expected.

Unless the usual 'other things being equal' condition obtains, all this can never guarantee sustainability, let alone the viability of greener versions of society. In Chapters 6 to 8 I drop this condition and discuss policies aimed at controlling the three parameters of sustainability: demand (Chapter 6), distribution (Chapter 7) and supply (Chapter 8). As to questions of demand, I mainly focus on population control as the one and only way to safeguard sustainability. I present the rapid reproducer paradox, according to which population policies always punish the good guys and reward the guilty parties. After ascertaining that morally justifiable demand-side policies can never guarantee sustainability, I turn to just distribution schemes as alternative solutions (Chapter 7). Here, I take up the restraint principle once more to consider its effects for just acquisition, possession, distribution, transfer and use of nature. I discuss the consequences of these principles both within and between political institutions – thus, in a way, addressing the green concerns about international justice. Finally, Chapter 8 deals briefly with supply-side solutions (cf. most issues on the green agenda in Section 3.5). We shall encounter problems here quite similar to those in the field of demand-side solutions. As a result, we find that liberal democracy must paradoxically combine adherence to the restraint principle with active support for technological solutions to environmental problems. In the end, then, there is bad news and good news. The bad news is that liberal democracy cannot guarantee sustainability for the full 100 per cent. The good news is that, in environmental terms, liberal democracy is able (morally) to do the best that can be expected from any political system.

Chapter 9 consists of desert and leftovers. It opens with an analysis of the metaphysical positions liberal democratic theorists could, or would have to, accept if they stayed within the boundaries of sustainability. As it turns out, there are only a few options liberalism excludes: it is inconsistent with mysticism, materialism, determinism (to some degree) and an understanding of nature as being naturally in equilibrium. Beyond this, anything goes: liberalism could even have a deep green, holistic and organicistic view on nature. However, I shall argue that as a rule, liberalism's metaphysical stance is of no consequence whatsoever for the green political potential of liberal democracy.

A second issue I discuss here is whether it is possible and desirable for liberalism to move 'beyond' sustainability: that is, towards more typically deep green conceptualizations of environmental problems, towards a less conservative view, or both. The first would, among other things, require that obligations to reference groups other than future generations of humans be recognized more explicitly than has been done so far, and I argue (once more) that this is impossible. It would also require that a more eco- or biocentric, more distinctively holistic, less materialistic, less egocentric, less technocratic ethic be incorporated in the institutions of liberal democracy. I shall argue that even if this were possible, it would most likely be ineffective, and if it were effective, it would still be undesirable. Liberal democracy would then cross the line between democracy and authoritarianism. The second modification, the move away from conservatism, requires that we drop some or all references to limits to growth. However, calls for a less conservative attitude towards nature and towards social development than sustainability prescribes are partly based on a category mistake. Both the precepts of liberal democracy and those of sustainability demand that purely physical limits to the development of society and nature are morally relevant and should be taken seriously. Yet there is nothing in either sustainability or liberal democracy that puts the then (perhaps) imposed moral limits, i.e. limits on what we should do rather than can do, beyond critique.

I then discuss the genesis of preferences. Up till now, I have assumed that preferences are given and that the political process is an input-output machine. Environmentalists and theorists of democracy, however, point out, with good reasons, that democratic processes and debate shape and transform preferences and opinions rather than merely straightforwardly translate them into a collective choice. In my comments, I make two points here. I shall assert that there is no guarantee and no reason to believe that more democracy or public deliberation will make a society more environmentally sane, as some environmentalists have argued. I defend the view that environmental interests are still best protected when they are, to some degree, put beyond debate and protected by principles like the ones developed in this text. I shall also try to give a short answer to the objection that liberal democracy, being procedural, is incompatible with the ends-oriented
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approach of environmentalism (cf. Dobson 1996). I hope to have shown in the preceding eight chapters that it is not.

Last, I turn to the most fundamental green critique of liberal democracy, the one that sees it as a vehicle of materialism, consumerism, egoism, modernism and modernity, industrialism and many other deeper causes of the ecological crisis. Although critiques of this sort are well founded in so far as liberal democracy is in many ways an historical product and facilitator of said deeper causes, we must make an analytical distinction between liberalism and the Spirit (or Spectre) of Progress. Liberty, equality, justice, democracy and all other values incorporated in the institutions of liberal democracy are not only the monopoly of one cultural ‘epoché’ (in Michel Foucault’s sense of the word). We must also distinguish political from economic liberalism, since it is in the latter sphere that materialistic, consumeristic attitudes and behaviour find their most extensive freedom from public and moral scrutiny. We should even distinguish between the idea of a free market and its present incarnation in the form of capitalism. As an example of an alternative form of the free market, I shall briefly discuss the way it was conceived of in medieval times. We should not read this as a plea for a return to medieval society or as one for communitarianism. All the example demonstrates is that green liberalism requires individual responsibility to be viable: citizen virtue but even more civic virtue, and particularly virtue in the market place.

4

On value

Assistant: Understanding of what, Master?
Evil One: Of digital watches, and soon I shall have understanding of video cassette recorders and card telephones. And when I have understanding of them, I shall have understanding of computers. And when I have understanding of computers, I shall be the Supreme Being.

God isn’t interested in technology. He knows nothing of the potential of the microchip or the silicon revolution. Look how he spends his time: forty-three species of parrot, nipples for men.

Assistant: Slugs.
Evil One: Slugs—created slugs. They can’t hear, they can’t speak, they can’t operate machinery. I mean, are we not in the hands of a lunatic?!

Michael Palin, Terry Gilliam: Time Bandits (Paramount Pictures 1982)

4.1 Intrinsic and external value

We crave, desire, reject, favour, disapprove of things. We do not like the colour of this, the taste of that, the behaviour of one and the attitude of another. We pass value judgements, value as a noun being for normative standards (norms) what ‘unit of measurement’ is for empirical standards like size, weight, wave length, left-right, income, education. We judge by standards of taste, beauty, rightness, goodness, grammatical correctness. Some of these standards can be applied universally or almost universally (e.g. beauty and goodness), though they need not make much sense in all contexts. We can ask whether it is good that lemons are yellow or whether they would not be more beautiful if they were purple, but (genetic engineering aside) there is little we can do about it except perhaps complain about the laws of nature or about their incompetent implementation. This is what—to most of us—makes questions of this sort different from the