Liberalism is Always Greener on the Other Side of Mill: A Reply to Piers Stephens

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Given our shared interest in giving green political thought a basis in liberalism, I discuss five of Piers Stephens’ objections to Green Liberalism. (1) I deny that I use preferences as black boxes, prejudicing liberalism in favour of a human-nature divide. (2) I argue that my characterisation of liberalism as defending among other things the ‘liberty of life’ can represent all forms of liberalism from Locke to Mill. (3) Reducing all value attached to nature to ‘external’ value does not, I believe, necessarily misrepresent the way we actually value nature. (4) I agree with Stephens that the notions of civic, civil and marketplace virtue are insufficiently developed. (5) However, I disagree with Stephens’ accusation that the often formal vocabulary used in Green Liberalism would render the theory unable to introduce an element of individual obligation or virtue in liberalism, thus giving no reason to care about the environment.

There is something disquieting about seeing one’s book described as ‘required reading’, ‘stimulating’ and ‘thought-provoking’ – it brings to mind the old native American (and Klingon) expression ‘It is a good day to die’. In academic circles, appreciative remarks like these fortunately do not express unconditional surrender but, to the contrary, announce that this is only the beginning of an argument. One is then most fortunate to encounter an opponent whose comments are equally stimulating and thought-provoking. For a moment, I myself was convinced that Stephens was right and I was wrong, but then nobody is perfect.

Stephens and I do, of course, share a common point of reference, liberal political theory, and a common object – in his words, a fear of ‘throwing out the liberal baby with the extraneous Enlightenment bathwater’. We also seem to share a conviction that liberal democratic institutions and liberal values are here to stay and are worth sustaining. One other thing that moved me in writing Green Liberalism [Wissenburg, 1998] was a theoretical consideration: if green convictions hold any water, if green political thought

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is to be something more than postmodern preaching to the converted, then those ideas should be defensible in other contexts as well – for instance in that of the dominant ideology and philosophy of our times. Stephens and I both want to ‘green’ liberalism, but each in our own way. Hence our discussion.

Stephens is right in saying that *Green Liberalism* is liberal first and green second. It was my intention to investigate the degree to which green ideas can fit in a liberal framework. However, there are many liberalisms – there is a world of difference between the liberalisms of Rawls, Mill, Locke, Gauthier, Spinoza, Kant and so on. I therefore tried to characterise liberalism in terms as formal, neutral and technical as possible: as a meta-theory, a liberalism of liberalisms. One example of this is the use of the word ‘preferences’, about which more will be said later; another the use of ‘rights’ (in an unconventional sense) as a catch-all phrase to describe all (im)material goods distributed in society. A liberal-cum-logical evaluation of this purely formal concept led me to formulate the ‘restraint principle’, which universally prohibits the attribution of a right to destroy ‘unless necessary’, and which, where destruction becomes unavoidable, prescribes compensation in the form of the best possible way of restoring the status quo ex ante. With the aid of this principle and a shortlist of liberal key values (among which the ‘liberty of life’), I devoted the greater part of the book to greening existing liberal assumptions about the subjects worthy of inclusion in the polity and about admissible distributive, supply- and demand-side solutions to environmental problems.

The proviso in the restraint principle (‘unless necessary’) is open to interpretation in accordance with one’s specific taste in liberalism; I have given mine elsewhere [Wissenburg, 1999a]. In this connection, I want to set one thing straight: the restraint principle is not so much a revamped Rawlsian savings principle as it is a principle logically implying the savings principle; the two were, moreover, developed independently, historically speaking. I have presented the restraint principle elsewhere [Wissenburg, 1999b] as an extension of Rawls’ savings principle, purely for PR reasons; the two interpretations (extension and implication) are, however, in fact logically equivalent.

It is against this background that Stephens formulates his critique. On the one hand, I am very glad that he offers me an opportunity to clarify parts of my argument and address a few issues that remained underdeveloped or unresolved. On the other hand, to do so I have to interpret Stephens’ rather complex essay, at the risk of misinterpreting him. The way I read his comments, I have five charges to answer, in addition to their shared implication that I do not do enough to delegitimise versions of liberalism that are hostile to nature:
(1) Preferences are treated as black boxes, as the input of political
decision-making, but the genesis of preferences is thereby neglected;
preferences are thus made sacred.

(2) The characterisation of liberalism as a theory defending among other
things the liberty of life, that is the freedom to live life in accordance
with one’s individual plan of life and theory of the good, is not a good
representation of all forms of liberalism; the description fits Locke, for
instance, better than Mill.

(3) Reducing all value attached to nature to ‘instrumental’ or ‘external’
value misrepresents the way we actually value things.

(4) The suddenly introduced notions of civic, civil and marketplace virtue
are insufficiently developed.

(5) By opting for a formal vocabulary, in particular by committing the sins
described under 1–4, I would be unable, ‘miss the tools’, to introduce
an element of individual obligation or virtue in liberalism; my version
of green liberalism would give no reason to care about the
environment.

In logical terms, the fifth objection can be separated from the rest: even if
charges (1)–(4) can be refuted, the conclusion drawn in (5) may still be true.
All five therefore need to be answered individually. In addition, Stephens
makes two less or unrelated comments: (6) I have (too) little to say about
liberal economics, and (7) far too little about how (the genesis of)
preferences can legitimately be influenced in public debate or by
government policy, once the methodological ‘black box’ assumption is
dropped. I shall discuss these topics in this order.

I. Preferences

There are great advantages attached to modelling the decision-making
process in society in the simplest form of an input–output machine, thereby
representing the tastes, loves, vetoes, likes and dislikes of people living and
operating alone or in a family, party or company context, all with one single
term: individual preferences. One of the advantages of treating preferences
as given, as black boxes, is that we need no assumptions about human
nature – there is no need to assume beforehand that we are at the core, say,
all good-natured hippies, nor a risk of confusing liberalism with mind-
altering ideologies or liberal individualism with totalitarian collectivism.
Secondly, there was a strategic consideration: use of the term preferences is
generally associated with right-wing liberals of libertarian or rational choice extraction. If the term helps to build a case for the existence of a green potential even in rightish liberal thought, much more is gained than if the reader could only be convinced of the green potential of mainstream, more social democratic, liberalism and had to take for granted the claim that similar arguments applied mutatis mutandis to the more die hard *laissez-faire* liberalism. I may have been too successful in this respect, as Stephens’ critique witnesses: he feels the terminology actually makes it more difficult to fit mainstream liberalism into the picture.

The main reason for using the term preferences is, however, simply methodological: the aim was to neutralise the differences that exist within liberalism between different conceptions of the input of the political system: preferences, considered preferences, interests and so on. ‘Preferences’ are a special case of a general methodological strategy aimed at reducing the complexity of real existing liberal theory with its infinite number of shades. In order to determine whether liberals could adopt green views or policies, a long series of factors acting as variables across the liberal spectrum had to be assumed to be constant, at least temporarily. Preferences is one of these pseudo-constants; other are the list of liberal key variables, the idea that all goods distributed in society are material goods, that all duties, obligations, permissions etc. can be reduced to rights, that all ownership rights are individual rights, and that liberalism as a political theory and as political institutions can be strictly distinguished from liberalism as an economic doctrine and practice.

In short, I admit that I treat the multitude of likes and dislikes, tastes and feelings, ideas, convictions and prejudices that are, in real life, the input of political decision-making under one artificial heading – and I admit that I treated preferences as constants, as black boxes, as given from the point of view of decision-makers. That does not, however, mean that preferences would come out of nowhere and would be beyond any form of private, social, governmental or other interference. They are not sacred; at least, very few liberals believe they are. How preferences can legitimately be developed and how they can become legitimate input is partly a practical question that relates to Stephens’ last point of critique; I shall therefore postpone the discussion until we reach that point.

The thing to note is that Stephens’ objection is not so much aimed at methodological individualism or black-boxing preferences as such, but at its allegedly being more fit to represent some forms of liberal anthropology, particularly Lockean possessive individualism, than others like Mill’s. I disagree, and as I hope to show in the next two sections, I disagree with reason: Millian liberalism, Millian human nature and Millian or Jamesian views on the formation of value judgements can all be quite well represented with terms like ‘preferences’.
One thing I must admit, though: treating preferences as black boxes allows but does not give reasons why individuals should care about their natural environment; in that respect, Stephens is perfectly right.

II. The Liberty of Life

In *Green Liberalism*, I characterise liberalism as defending – among other things – the liberty of life, that is, the liberty to live the life of one’s choosing, and as requiring the state to remain impartial with regard to individual views of the good. Stephens believes this to be a ‘scholastic device, an explanatory hook on which to hang a variety of theories, rather than a characterisation of liberalism *tout court*’, a description that covers contemporary (Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian) liberalism but not (some) classical forms of liberalism. He may be right that it works that way in actual fact, but he does give me too much honour – I intended to use terms like liberty of life and impartiality or neutrality as formal devices in order to include as broad a range of liberalisms as possible. Then again, if it really were nothing but a scholastic device, part of Stephens’ objections would lose their force: if device or definition X was not intended to cover theory Y, there is no reason to complain that theory Y is not covered by definition X.

But let us avoid a pointless discussion, let us assume that Stephens and I both want Millian and Lockean thought to be defined as liberal, and let us focus on what really matters: Stephens’ observation that some versions of liberalism do not fit my picture, particularly that Locke fits better than Mill. There is a contradiction in there, but we shall come to that later. He argues that classical liberalism (exemplified by both Locke and Mill) and, if I read between the lines, in fact every form of liberalism, defends a substantive common good and a substantive view of human nature. Neutrality, in particular, is seen as a good because it is good for someone, and it is good for someone because it promotes the individual’s ‘flourishing’ in some way.

As with preferences, the decision to characterise liberalism in terms of impartiality was based in part on methodological considerations. Liberals have defended a multitude of versions of impartiality for a multitude of reasons. On the one hand, in a tradition dating back to Erasmus’s defence of toleration and Melanchton’s invention of adiaphora (things or practices irrelevant to salvation, therefore ‘private’ [cf. Skinner, 1978]), liberals have defended impartiality for strategic or evolutionary reasons. They may believe in the possibility of a unique good way of life but not in a proof for its existence, or they may not believe in the force of an ethical argument to that effect, or they may believe in a plurality of theories of the good, or in the future discovery, through a process of trial and error, of an answer to the quest for the good. Whatever the reason may be, ‘tolerance’ liberals from
Locke, Spinoza and Mill to Kant and Rawls are at worst agnostics but remain interested in promoting ‘a’ good life. There is also another tradition of a more nihilistic nature, dating back to late Enlightenment scepticism with regard to ultimate answers, in which the content of an individual’s theory of the good and plan of life are irrelevant, even if they form empty sets. Traces and often more than traces of this type of ‘indifference’ liberalism can be found in theories like Nozick’s, Rothbard’s, Buchanan’s and Gauthier’s \cite{Nozick, 1974; Rothbard, 1973; Buchanan, 1975; Gauthier, 1986}. By characterising liberalism in terms of impartiality and the liberty of life, I hoped to cover liberalism from the most indifferent corner down to for example, Locke’s ideas about a sumnum bonum for humans.

Stephens argues that what exactly constitutes impartiality or neutral treatment is highly contentious. It takes an anthropology, ‘some background model of human nature’, to justify particular liberties and with that particular versions of liberalism and interpretations of impartiality. This makes perfect sense, unless one would want to defend liberty or a particular liberty as valuable solely and purely for its own sake, that is, regardless of whether anyone actually benefits from it in any way. No liberal in her right mind will take that position. However, if an account of human nature is needed, it does not necessarily follow that this must be a substantive, in Rawls’s terms a ‘thick’, one. It is precisely to avoid siding up with this or that liberal school and to gather them all under the same heading that I preferred to describe liberalism in terms of impartiality and the liberty of life. The result is a formalistic version of liberalism, one that, without a substantive anthropology, lacks the element of ‘what it is all about’ or ‘the meaning of life and liberalism’ not to mention ‘the meaning of nature’. The question whether a practical, convincing political theory needs that element must remain unresolved here (although I have a feeling Stephens and I would agree quite swiftly on an answer) since it is beside the point. As I hope to show in a moment, the first question we need to answer is not which kind of liberalism is greenest or can be made more ecologically sensitive than others – but whether there is room for green ideas in liberalism at all.

Then again, to use Stephens’ words, even the most formalistic liberalism will sit more easily with some naturalistic assumptions than others, implying that mine is biased in the direction of Lockean possessive individualism. If Locke fits the formalistic description of liberalism, Stephens could (but need not yet) be right. If it does not, if we falsify this hypothesis, then we would have a case for arguing that (my liberalism of) liberalism(s) cannot do without but necessarily needs a thick anthropology. Before we turn to the (further) issue of the lesser fit between my formalism and Mill, let us then first consider Locke.
In Locke’s theory, state neutrality clearly promotes a good: the expression of individual initiative, or the moral rationality of subjecting nature and acquiring property through labour, thereby creating liberty and room to flourish as an individual. That describes human nature. Locke does not just want the state to rule out some activities in the pursuit of liberty, but to actively promote a specific (anti-‘natural’) way of life as good. All this is a far cry from – say – Nozick’s relative indifference about whether or not an individual values and takes the opportunities that full-fledged libertarianism offers. Yet Locke’s view can be translated as ‘promoting the liberty of life’ as easily as Nozick’s. In both views, human nature is a given, an objective fact, posing side-constraints on what a rational plan of life may be, a rational theory of the good, a sensible use of the liberty of life.

The crucial difference lies in the rejection by Nozick and in fact by virtually all liberals since Hume of the naturalistic fallacy: is does not imply ought, a statement of fact does not imply an ethical judgement. For Locke, is (nature) still directly and unproblematically implied ought (natural law); in our times on the other hand, the idea that every call of nature must be followed and every act against nature (from flying to masturbating) be punished has, let us say, lost some ground, particularly in liberal corners. Certain things may still be ‘(un)natural’, but they are not therefore (ir)rational, (un)desirable or (un)ethical. In brief: since Locke identified rational with natural behaviour, his side-constraints on sensible or rational action are more stringent than those of latter-day liberals, yet it remains undeniable that within the boundaries drawn by human nature and natural law exists a sphere left open to adiaphora: different opinions, attitudes and behavioural patterns. In other words and still briefer, for that sphere Locke defends the liberty of life.

If Locke can be translated into a modern, formalised liberal terminology, the hypothesis that liberalism can do without a substantive anthropology as its basis remains unrefuted. Yet it may still (but need not necessarily) be true, if formalisation creates a prejudice in one direction – in this case, as Stephens argues, in favour of Locke and against Mill.

On the one hand, Stephens is concerned that modern mainstream liberalism, in particular the way I present it, seems inclined to promote a Lockean view of the human as a ‘disconnected self’, a want-thing ‘projecting preferences into policy space’. As a result, the human subject and its object, say nature, are split apart. Nature becomes environment, and the object–subject relation becomes one of exploitation, use, instrumentality and egoism. What is lost is the ‘full-blown experiential encounter’ between human and nature in which, Stephens believes, deep and important values originate. Since this objection relates more to the status of the concept of intrinsic value, I must postpone discussion of it until the next section.
On the other hand, Stephens feels that I (unfairly) exclude Millian liberalism. Two comments are in order here. First, it is not clear why Mill should be such a source of inspiration for liberals with green inclinations. Historically, he may be responsible for the introduction of ideas like limits to growth, the steady state economy and the harm principle, all valuable instruments for the modern green political theorist. Yet he is not known as the author of *On the subjection of foxes*, nor have I ever noticed him writing about (obligations to) future generations or the intrinsic value of nature. Whatever reasons Mill gives for caring about the environment are either of an aesthetic or of a hard-boiled anthropocentric nature.

Secondly, we can make a case for Mill’s view of liberty being covered by the term liberty of life along the same lines as in the case of Locke: both adhere to a substantive view of human nature, yet leave room for *adiaphora*. In a way, Mill fits better than Locke: he is more of an agnostic about the *sumnum bonum* than Locke, and unlike the latter more interested in discouraging ‘harmful’ behaviour than in promoting particular theories of the good life.

It can even be argued that – like Rawls’s savings principle – Mill’s harm principle and his idea of limits to growth form a special case, a logical implication, of the restraint principle. The latter excludes in principle every form of unjustifiable destruction, harm done to the liberty of other humans being just one of the possible arguments against exploiting nature. It also allows arguments based on need, which fits the description of Mill’s world of limited and finite resources.

Even the impression that Mill’s encouragement of governments promoting morally good lives, whether or not individuals care, is at odds with the liberty of life thing, or with black-boxing preferences, must be rejected. One of the distinguishing features of both Millian liberalism and, despite its formalism, modern mainstream liberalism, as opposed to Lockean liberalism and libertarianism, is their being meddlesome. Individual or collective preferences, ‘projected into policy space’, are seldom reflected directly and unaltered in policy itself; instead, there is a (flexible) list of liberal values that take precedence over the whim of the people.

A Millian like Stephens would argue that a government has a duty to promote autonomy and favour valuable freedoms over less valuable freedoms; a formalist like I would insist that governments must refrain from interference unless interference serves to protect threatened liberal values. The difference between the two positions is like that between the half-full and the half-empty bottle of vodka: purely academic. In the end, the argument for interference is based upon a ranking and (e)valuation of liberal values (including democracy or reflecting preferences). Liberals disagree on
the ranking, sometimes even on the entries on the list, but not on the principle of ranking. Hence, depending on whether a liberal interprets liberty as opportunities, means, valuable choices or formal options [Van Hees and Wissenburg, 1999], and thus ranks different liberties differently, interference by public authorities in private lives in the shape of the redistribution of rights, property, money, technology and so on not only becomes legitimate – it can even legitimately become patronising and still be called liberal.

A brief conclusion: Stephens’ second charge must, I believe, be dismissed.

III. Value

Even if a formal representation of liberalism does not immediately commit one to a Lockean view of the individual, there is another reason why within modern liberalism, or at least Green Liberalism, an anthropological bias in favour of the old Enlightenment subject–object distinction could still exist. Stephens is not too explicit on this; I believe at least two interpretations of his argument are possible. Put radically, if one rejects the notion of intrinsic value, one seems (a) obliged to value nature (among other things) for instrumental reasons only and (b) to exclude the pragmatist view of value – and one might argue that pragmatists like James or Dewey are liberals at heart. The less radical version of the argument is that the pragmatist view of value (which may or may not be a version of intrinsic value and would be sensible in itself, regardless of the possible liberal inclinations of their advocates) cannot be squared with the notion of instrumental or external value.

It is true that most modern liberals, including myself, are highly suspicious of the concept of intrinsic value. Some versions of the concept of intrinsic value present it as the unexplained in accounts of value. It may, for instance, be true that we value a sequoia for its size, age, beauty, persistence, and the quality of the wood, in brief, for what we see in it, but would it not still be valuable if no humans, no valuing authorities, were around? Would we be indifferent about whether or not the tree be blown to smithereens by a computer once the last human had passed away? Apart from serious and probably irreparable (epistemo)logical flaws in last-person-arguments like this one, the problem is that even if we would all share the same intuition in favour of saving the tree, that still does not prove that intrinsic value exists. We may not be able to explain (yet) why pears are shaped the way they are, but that is insufficient reason to assume the existence of a Father Pear whose little helpers do the trick. Moreover, the fact that you and I care about this sequoia even when we are not around, just like we care about what happens
to our loved ones when we are separated from them, the fact that X matters to *me* and that harm to X is harm to me, is a far more forceful reason to value and protect X – particularly on a liberal account – than the story that we should convince ourselves to care about X even though no one actually cares.

Other interpretations of intrinsic value can directly be reduced, one way or another, to reasons for appreciating or valuing a thing X because of *what it means to us* (or, but that is just a roundabout way of saying the same, to others or other things we care about). This means that the value of X is external to X. In sum, the notion of intrinsic value is either redundant and perhaps even inopportune, or meaningless.

All value attached to nature is external to nature (or so we assume); but that does not imply that the valuer and the valued are destined to be fully conscious subject and fully passive object, nor that the twain shall ne’er meet. I agree with Stephens that in using ‘external value’ and ‘instrumental value’ as synonyms, I went too far. The latter term has a far too specific and pejorative meaning to serve as a substitute for the former. I also agree with Stephens that I went too far by saying that we value everything for a *reason*; perhaps I should have said ‘inner cause’ and at the very least I should have explained what I meant. I owe the reader that explanation as well as a humble apology.

To show that we do not always value things for a preceding reason, Stephens gives a counterexample: his feelings when, walking in the country, his eye is drawn to a pheasant flying from the undergrowth – he has, at that particular moment, no particular conscious reason for looking rather than not looking. The valuing is done afterwards. The example is attractive, yet, I believe, ineffective. There is, for one, every reason to believe that what makes us look is instinct – some combination of primeval motives like the hunt for food and the fear of being eaten. It could even be something deeper: a purely physical reaction to change with which even the subconscious has (probably) nothing to do, just like withdrawing one’s hand from the socket when an electric charge hits us. Let us assume that it was instinct that moved Stephens’ eyes, though – a preceding if not conscious reason.

The rules we follow subconsciously – instinct, emotions, second nature, virtues in the Aristotelian sense – can be made and unmade. Our assessment of the ‘right’ way of dealing with them may differ from complete loss of control through Mill’s quest for emotional harmony and Locke’s desire to subject the emotions down to the most rigid Stoicism – hence the difference between your immediate pleasure on seeing a happy child and my considered appreciation, or your immediate happiness in the first case and your hesitations about the beauty of my appearance. Yet the point is that these rules are in principle *reasons for*, not causes of action, hence that our
values, even if ‘experienced’ before consciousness awakens, describe what a thing means to us. (It is, I think, even possible to translate all this in terms of a Wittgensteinian conception of rule-following, where the rules follow the praxis, but that would probably make the argument too complex for this context.)

Referring to the Philosopher, Stephens offers a second and more interesting counterexample: friendship. No one stays friends with a fair-weather friend (a parasite) for long, he says, and I take it he means that fair-weatherism is the instrumental use of friends, whereas friends should be valued for non-instrumental reasons, not that a person who gives up on the imperfect fair-weather friend has herself made a cost-benefit analysis of the relationship. (Not to mention that bad weather has to occur before we can even identify a fair-weather friend.) Now this counterexample is a very good illustration of why the term instrumental value was indeed ill chosen: it causes serious confusion.

Like I said above, the concept of value I defend assumes that the value of X is determined by what it means to us or to others or other things we care about. We value the rod because of what it means to the education of our sons (or at least we did in Biblical times), and thereby value the rod instrumentally. We value our sons, ideally, because of what they mean to themselves, and admittedly, it is unlikely that anyone would describe this in an ordinary, casual conversation as instrumental value. And yet, in a purely technical and formal sense, the term can still be applied: we value X, in this case our sons, for ‘what’ they mean to ‘us’. We value them for the effect they have on our consciousness or happiness or existence or whatever we feel is relevant about ‘us’, an effect for which they are the instrument, and we fill in the blanks left by the abstract ‘what’ by ‘what they mean to themselves’. We thus value our sons for what their meaning to themselves means to us. Technically it all fits – still, the term instrumental value causes confusion and should have been avoided.

Stephens’ counterexamples are correct in reminding us that we value things for reasons other than consciously plotted purely self-regarding reasons, and thus can value nature for other reasons than those consciously constructed. The reduction of intrinsic value to external value, to what X means to us rather than in itself, in no way excludes these possibilities: turning up for work because of the money or because of the joy involved in a praxis (that is, having an interest versus being interested) are both admissible reasons. They both describe what our job may mean to us. Nothing then keeps us from adhering to a pragmatic view on the value of nature, from learning to value nature through interaction with it, thus developing ourselves and learning to know ourselves; nothing forces us subjects into a ‘relational disconnection’ with the object nature.
Once more, Stephens’ objections to a formalised description of liberalism seem to boil down to a conviction that it cannot exist, that a liberal political theory must defend a substantive theory of the good, in his case a Millian or pragmatic account of the good of nature and the good shape of nature. We stand on opposite sides of Mill, it seems: my aim has been to construct a more comprehensive, general, permissive theory of liberalism that does not immediately commit one to a specific view of the good sustainable society, the right kind of nature, the greenest colour of grass. From that perspective, Stephens’ main argument still stands – technically. Although there is virtually unlimited room for reasons to care about nature, my theory of agency and value does not propose, pick or promote one in particular.

IV. Individual Virtue

Stephens’ fourth charge is that I suddenly introduce notions of civic, civil and marketplace virtue, notions that are, moreover, insufficiently developed. What we have here is, in fact, a combination of three problems. One is the almost purely technical question of what we should take the term virtue to mean. A second is whether liberalism – after all, a public philosophy preaching non-interference in private theories of the good – can be squared with the introduction of private commandments: obligations, duties, virtues, etc. Third and last comes the question whether my own account of virtues is sufficiently developed to meet whatever answers should be given to the other two questions.

Virtue no longer is what it used to be; the term is, in everyday speech, often used in a very loose way to refer to the creation of ethically good results, or to any kind of private motivation that somehow expresses some kind of personal rule and meets some standard of the ethically good. Although it would fit my critic’s description of Green Liberalism as formalistic, that is not the way I intended to use the term. For once, I took sides and applied an Aristotelian beyond-good-and-evil interpretation of virtue: excellence in, or the well-controlled operation of, an intellectual, physical or moral capacity required for an individual to flourish in harmony with a given environment [cf. Barry, 1999]. Nevertheless, I do believe that even in this respect it is possible to ‘formalise’ and generalise liberal theories using a catch-all concept, basic reasons, as a ‘formal category’ free of contingent grounds for behaviour, to represent virtually all theories of motivation: from virtue through principle, rule, considered judgement down to impulse [Wissenburg, 1999a].

The second problem is more important: can liberalism support a view like this, or another interpretation of virtue, or in fact any private code of
behaviour? This also seems to be what worries Stephens most – not that one particular author (yours truly) would fail to give a reason to ‘virtuously’ care about nature, that is, to put care in the format of virtue ethics, but that liberalism fails to support any reason at all for caring about nature. Two things need to be said in this context.

I have, for starters, already answered this objection implicitly above: Stephens is right, to a degree; liberalism or at the very least modern liberalism tries not to support any particular theory of the good – but neither does it prohibit it. Liberalism is a public philosophy, a code for the public sphere designed to allow individuals to be, say, Buddhists and Aristotelians and hedonists and fruitarians as far as their views about personal salvation are concerned, yet allows them at the same time to live together without bloodshed by conforming to the same public view.

Additionally, whether or not my or anyone’s being partial to a specific view of individual morality can be squared with impartiality as liberalism’s public philosophy is not the point. The point is that we need to decide first and foremost whether ‘virtue’ (in the broad, popular, imprecise sense) is considered important as a form of obligation (prescribing that one should act in accordance with virtue or rule X) or as a personal motivation (prescribing that one should act according to X and believe X). To save the Earth and all the bugs on it we need only the former, and my argument in Green Liberalism is that liberalism can perform this trick: its attribution of rights to individuals (and thereby duties to their fellows), the restraint principle, all these and more are public rules creating individual obligations. That I have left room for the latter, even argued for a specific individual moral code, is in fact a redundant addition.

Which brings me to two conclusions. First, as to Charge the Fourth, Stephens either argues that I do not give a reason to virtuously care about nature, virtue taken in the strict sense, an objection that, if true, would have been insufficient to justify his concluding and fifth charge. Or he argues that liberalism cannot support a private theory of the good – thereby contradicting his own earlier arguments (see the previous section). In short, the fourth charge, even if we had been forced to accept it, cannot support the fifth.

Secondly, with a view to the first four charges: yes, I do use formal categories, and yes, at first sight they seem to fit Locke more than Mill. But they do so only because of the language and terminology chosen. In the final analysis, the terms and concepts can accommodate both. Hence, if Stephens is right on count 5 of the indictment, it is not because of these four charges. Or to put it negatively, so far I have not given any grounds to refute charge 5 either.
V. Reasons to be Green

Stephens’ main reason for distrusting attempts at greening formalised or modern versions of liberalism like mine is that they would give us no reason to care about either (civic) virtue or nature. By now, it will not come as a surprise that I agree with him – up to a point – but fail to see the problem, and that I disagree with him beyond that point.

It is true that neither my green liberalism nor any other more or less formalised representation of liberalism contains necessary, let alone sufficient, conditions for the creation or evolution of virtuous, green and virtuously green individuals. Liberalism only cares about (and may interfere with) personal convictions if they harm others, if they illegitimately infringe on their freedoms and lives, and convictions cannot do that unless they are translated into practice. At least in principle then, liberalism only interferes with practices, which (like I said above) is just as much as we need to Save the Earth from Destruction: we do not need to become noble wilds to combat ecological degradation, just as we do not need to become Christians to follow the rule that ‘thou shalt not kill’. Hence, up to the point where I start to disagree with Stephens, I am inclined to believe that we are arguing about another half-empty bottle: although liberalism does not give individuals reasons to be green or virtuous, as a political philosophy it is not an obstacle to virtue nor (let us pretend that it can be a specific virtue) to greenness. What it excludes is the introduction of one particular substantive theory of the good and green society as authoritative and sacrosanct.

The point at which I start to disagree on principle with Stephens is where he implicitly demands that liberalism should have a substantive moral element, that it should make people do the right thing for the right reason rather than just any old reason, and that they should do the right green things for the right green reasons. This argument remains unvoiced yet is omnipresent in his critique, for instance at the end of his Introduction, when he refers to the incapacity of formalised versions of liberalism to deal with the ‘corrosive effects of market instrumentalisation of the world’.

If we want to be sure that people do things for the right reasons, or at least not for the wrong reasons, we have to allow a state to influence the genesis of preferences and not just the exercise of rights. Although I assumed preferences to be constant (a given) throughout the greater part of Green Liberalism, I never excluded that possibility as illegitimate. Yet it does raise a dangerous question: what is the right thing to do? Unless we take account of the fact that reasons, motives and policies are based on fallible human knowledge and ever questionable moral convictions, that is, that authorities are as fallible as any human being, allowing a state to influence the development of personal convictions is to move back to dark
pre-democratic ages. If there are grounds for believing a green life to be the right life, then these grounds are by definition insufficient to justify forcing people to believe in them. The most that can be demanded is that people consider arguments for particular green ideologies and respect those living accordingly – and I hope to have given more than enough ‘formal’ reasons for believing that liberalism allows and can even oblige this.

One other problem with the more substantive versions of liberalism relates to a dictum accredited to Lenin: trust is good, control is better. ‘Thick’ liberalism wants to make people do the right thing for the right reasons, reasons that are assumed to be undeniable, part of our nature, or ‘intrinsically’ clear. In trusting humans, it fails to insure society against doubleplusungood individuals, people who do the morally wrong thing and/or do things for the wrong reasons – or rather, people who deviate from the ideal.

Next, to repeat a point made earlier, although formalised versions of liberalism as a philosophy for the public sphere do not (necessarily) ascribe a role to virtue in any sense, broad or classical, liberalism does not exclude a morally good or virtuous impetus for individual behaviour either. In fact, it has to. No political or economic system can function without a sufficient number of individuals believing in it, and believing it to be in their best interest. The term interest can, of course, mean anything from self-interest in the popular sense (egoism) via virtue up to and including Stephens’ motivations derived from experiential ‘encounters’. In other words, a green liberalism requires a sufficient number of people motivated in the right direction, but not necessarily by one and the same motive; there is room for egoistic greed as a reason to care for nature as there is for the experiential encounter with nature.

Finally, and here we cross the border between the general and the specific, I have my doubts as to the methods Stephens would allow a ‘thick’ liberal government to apply in influencing preferences. The example he uses is that of town planning; he argues for bringing nature back to the city, for creating ‘points of contact’. No matter how much I may personally agree with his taste in city design and perhaps even architecture – tastes remain a rather personal affair; the effects of ‘points of contact’ may well be counterproductive:

(i) To install a positive appreciation of nature in humans, more is needed than the sheer presence of nature (or its absence: ‘you don’t know what you miss until it’s gone’). As long as we feel the need to use nature, we will, and circumstances often force us to do so beyond the limits of its carrying capacity. To presume a future world of plenty and luxury is utopian. What therefore seems required is a socially dominant
conception of need that stresses the primary importance of immaterial goods. We must be aware that the ideology of the priority of immaterial needs (the life of the spirit) is inherently hostile to that of material needs (the life of the flesh) as necessary conditions for the (other) good things in life. The former cannot define the shape of society without denigrating and discouraging the latter.

(ii) If it has to have the ‘right’ effect, bringing people closer to nature implies selecting appropriate bits of nature: even though wolves may be preferable to whatever currently walks the streets by night, it would not be good PR. Hence, the full range of the experience of nature would remain hidden, or would only be disclosed when appropriate. In other words, ways of life would be ‘suggested’ (almost prescribed) without disclosure of full information, limiting individuals’ freedom and rationality. After all, in the course of developing an autonomous self, rational decision-making is indispensable, at least next to and perhaps more than the pragmatic ‘pure experience’. In yet other words, it would be a policy based on lies and deceit, perhaps one too fundamental to be justified as a white lie.

Support for green parties and movements is probably not accidentally highest in circles that are farthest away from nature – Academia and the city. Creating points of contact, or any policy that changes our living environment, cannot IMHO be the beginning of a process of preference building as it would have been in 1970s authoritarian green ideologies; it should be the end (assuming it should happen at all). If one trusts people enough to live their own lives, make up their own minds and have an equal say in a democratic polity, one cannot at the same time pre-empt the public debate by framing the debate. For a liberal, the presumption must remain one against interference, against opening the door to substantive morality, to the kind of ideas that justify the degradation of one human being by another because the former would be superior. I suggest that this is the ultimate touchstone for any reforms. The well-being of humans and that of the environment go hand in hand [cf. de-Shalit, 1999] – if we cannot keep our fingers off each other, we most certainly cannot keep them off nature. From my point of view, that means the presumption must be one against overhauling our institutions and in favour of non-political, moral reform, using the institutions we have – because at least in comparison and perhaps overall, they are not doing so badly.
VI. Miscellaneous

Having refuted Stephens’ fifth charge, I now come to two important but less related issues. One concerns my strategy of virtually black-boxing the economic side of liberalism: is it not too easy to blame consumers and their desires for every possible contribution of the free market to environmental problems? The other issue relates to the practice of public debate: how exactly can preferences be made ‘debatable’, and to what extent can a government interfere – in practice? On these points, I generally agree with Stephens: they are tricky and deserve more attention than I gave them. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to do that here. I therefore have to indicate roughly how I would wish to answer them, rather than directly answer them.

The free market is an indispensable part of liberalism; it would not be the same without. Setting the economic sphere apart, black-boxing it, so to say, does indeed make it easier to claim that liberalism can be green. Many a critic of liberalism has, after all, blamed environmental problems on free trade, capitalism, industrialism and governmental non-interference with the market, rather than on the political structures or philosophical defence of liberalism. Since I focused on the latter topic, there was little more I could say about the former, other than that the free market is not necessarily an evil brown force.

Ideally, the market is a place where supply meets demand and where an exchange takes place if and only if the pay-off of the exchange beats that of non-exchange. Blaming the supply side alone for environmental problems would be unfair, as I have tried to show: unless all suppliers change their preferences and thereby pay-off in a green direction (a utopian expectation; demand always creates a supply), the market punishes the innovative. Ultimately, consumers’ preferences are the key factor: without a change in demands, greening the market is a hopeless enterprise. Then again, the argument also works the other way around. The character of the goods supplied will not change if consumers change into green consumers unless the pay-off for suppliers changes as well. Hence, it is not the structure of the free market itself that may or can be held responsible for environmental degradation, but the preferences of both producers and consumers – which, incidentally, means that I do not blame consumers only.

Against this background, more ought to be said about economics than I managed to do. For one, if preferences are ultimately to blame, the question of the genesis of preferences comes into focus again. Even economists with their usual reluctance to discuss the ethical status of preferences cannot avoid it. Theirs is, after all, the assumption that the free market is a place where preferences are sought to be satisfied as well as possible. If
preferences are determined by more complicated factors than ‘feeling good’ alone, say, by duties, obligations, virtue, honour, self-esteem, compliance with the categorical imperative – then these become a legitimate object of research for economists as well.

One other economic topic that deserves more attention is that of the limits of the free market, that is, of government interference. Greening the market is a collective choice problem, and not all such problems can be solved without involuntary co-ordination. Co-ordination may be required particularly if only a part of the consumers or producers develop sustainable preferences, creating an unsustainable green corner on the market (an often realistic expectation). Although compatible with liberalism and liberal democracy since it can promote economic democracy and liberty of choice [cf. Wissenburg, 1999c], government interference does not necessarily do so. Despite a century of welfare state policy and thousands of years of political interference with the market, the liberal debate on the criteria and conditions for ‘good’ interference is still immature.

As to the question of the practice of public debate: the development of preferences is a private affair in liberalism; in principle, governments have no business there. Yet I have also argued that preferences cannot be taken as given in real life as they can be in theory. They are based on (by definition uncertain) information, on (by definition disputed) moral judgements and (by definition questionable) feelings. Moreover, we humans constantly change and learn, and our preferences at any given moment in time reflect nothing but our accidental feelings at a randomly chosen moment. Much depends in a liberal democratic society on the degree to which individual preferences are considered judgements – among other things the quality of policies including those aimed at sustainability and the expression of the individual’s plan of life. Consequently, there is good reason for liberal authorities to promote a free and open debate aimed at improving the quality of the input and thereby output of political decision-making, and no reason not to.

The question how such a public debate should be given shape is rather practical, though no less interesting for that reason. Political theory can contribute little to this matter, usually discussed under the heading of deliberative democracy, except by designing criteria of fairness, openness, completeness and the like.

Liberal political theory, in particular, would point to and further develop three notions: freedom of information, freedom of debate, and modesty. Freedom of information, the input for every thought process, is essential to the education of one’s preferences. It cannot be guaranteed without an authority protecting the free flow of data, for example, by blocking press monopolies [Weale, 1999] or commercial monopolies on research, but
perhaps also by checking a flow of unreliable, redundant or misleading information. There will always be a certain tension between the state’s obligation to keep a distance from the contents of the debate and its responsibility for fair side-constraints. As one tends to say in Academia, more research is needed.

Freedom of debate illustrates this dilemma even more. The fairness and openness of public debate depends not only on the available information, but also on how the agenda is defined and how the information is treated. A perhaps unwelcome but therefore deliberately chosen example of a relatively unfair debate is that on smoking: although the information on the effects of smoking flows quite freely, the agenda is mostly determined by one exclusive and substantive idea of the good life only: medical health.

Finally, a liberal view on deliberative democracy would stress the need for modest expectations. Deliberative democracy leads to better decision-making and more informed decisions, not necessarily to better decisions. There is, for instance, no guarantee that more democracy will result in more support for green or sustainable policies. All considered judgements being and remaining provisional, the result may well be that present generations decide not to heed the interests of the next generation(s) in favour of the mere survival of those centuries from now, or that they decide to give priority to themselves and make procreation dependent on the amount of resources left after this generation took its part. Moreover, deliberative democracy works best in laboratory settings [cf. Fishkin, 1995]; in real life, debates are usually won by the clever, not the right.

In the final analysis, Stephens and I do not disagree all that much. We both deplore the fact that preferences were kept constant, that the economic sphere was virtually neglected, that individual morality and motivations were put in brackets, that some of the technical terms used are confusing. Perhaps we both yearn for more Green Liberalism. We disagree on whether a generalised representation of liberalism, my liberalism of liberalisms, can do justice to all real existing versions of liberalism, but I hope to have solved this matter. What we disagree on most is the degree to which a green liberalism should, and mine does, give individuals reasons to care about nature. From Stephens’ point of view, things look grey on my side of Mill. A too neutral liberalism is unlikely to motivate people to care for nature. As I see things, liberalism on his side of Mill risks being patronising with its promotion of poetry over pushpin. Elements of liberalism as a public philosophy, elements like rationality, moral equality, the liberty of life, give individuals sufficient incentive to respect their mutual obligations and thereby their indirect obligations to nature. They may do so for the ‘wrong’ reasons, not out of love for nature but sometimes love of self, and hence do so in different ways through different life-styles and policies – but who is to determine the ‘right’ reasons?
REFERENCES