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Citizens, Consumers and the Environment: Reflections on *The Economy of the Earth*¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a critical evaluation of Mark Sagoff's critique of economic approaches to environmental decision-making in *The Economy of the Earth*. Whilst endorsing many of Sagoff's specific arguments against the use of extended versions of cost-benefit analysis in making such decisions, it criticises the conceptual framework within which these arguments are developed. In particular, it suggests that what Sagoff represents as a tension between consumers and their public roles as citizens is better understood as one between culturally shared values concerning both the protection of nature and the pursuit of consumption; and that this conflict has itself to be resolved by them as citizens.

KEYWORDS: Citizens, consumers, environment, Sagoff

1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Economy of the Earth* Mark Sagoff presents a sustained and deservedly influential attack on what I shall call the 'economistic' view of how decisions should be made about environmental issues – about the protection of wilderness and landscapes, or of various species of plants or animals; the control of air and water pollution, and so on.² This economic approach does not consist in consigning such matters to the 'decisions' made by an unregulated market economy. Rather, it is espoused by those who recognise the frequent inability of markets to generate the 'right' decisions about the environment, but who nonetheless wish to deal with them by applying, in a suitably extended form, the conceptual framework of neo-classical economic theory to situations where the market itself fails to operate satisfactorily.

According to this view, environmental problems are due primarily to 'market failures': such failures being, roughly speaking, a matter of existing market mechanisms failing to do what markets are generally so good at doing. The solution, then, is to try to do what markets normally do so well in the cases which they do not succeed in dealing with. And (again, roughly speaking) what markets

are (generally) so good at doing is maximising the total amount of preference-satisfaction for any given set of resources: markets, that is, are efficient.³

Efficiency, then – which is itself defined in terms of preference-satisfaction – may be seen as the key criterion by reference to which environmental decisions are to be made, for the proponents of economism. The right decisions are those which meet this criterion; and where existing market mechanisms fail to do so, they must be replaced or supplemented by some further procedures which aim, in effect, at replicating the decisions of ideal markets.

What Sagoff argues is that this is not the proper way of thinking about environmental issues. Such decisions are not to be made on the basis of preference-satisfaction, and hence of ‘economic’ efficiency, but rather by reference to ethical, aesthetic, cultural, and political values. The distinction between *values* and *preferences*, he argues, is itself systematically ignored in the economic perspective. In particular, he objects to the way that the former are implicitly assimilated to the latter when they are seen simply as a further kind of preference, to be included alongside others in a suitably sophisticated mode of cost-benefit analysis (CBA).

Alongside this distinction between values and preferences are three others that play equally important parts in Sagoff’s overall argument: between the *citizen* and the *consumer*; *public* and *private interests*; and *virtues* and *methods* (pp. 7-14).

Sagoff presents ‘the consumer’ and ‘the citizen’ as two distinct roles that (nearly) everyone occupies in societies such as the contemporary USA. The two are distinct in at least the following respect: the kinds of considerations that do or should govern one’s actions in these two roles differ in such a way that they may often, though not necessarily, support mutually incompatible courses of action.

As a consumer, says Sagoff, one is exclusively and properly concerned with one’s ‘private interests’, and hence with the pursuit of preference-satisfaction. But as a citizen one is concerned with ‘the public interest’. One sees oneself as a member of a political community, with a specific cultural identity rooted in the history of one’s nation; and one enters into a certain kind of reflective debate with others about matters essentially concerning values – about what is morally etc. right and best for this whole community.

This kind of debate, Sagoff maintains, is at least potentially ‘rational’. However, this rationality is not to be understood as consisting in the application of a specifiable method or algorithmic procedure. Instead, he suggests, we should follow the anti-foundationalist philosopher Richard Rorty in seeing it as the exercise of certain moral ‘virtues’ of a politically relevant kind, such as ‘tolerance, respect for the opinion of others, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force’, and so on (p.12).⁴

Environmental decisions, then, are to be made by reference to values and not preferences; they involve one in one’s role as citizen and not as consumer – they

are 'political' and not 'economic'; they involve open political debate about the public interest, the good for the community, rather than the pursuit of private interests; and such debates are conducted in accordance with certain virtues, with their outcomes not being determinable by the application of any specifiable methods.

So it is in terms of this framework of conceptual distinctions that Sagoff conducts his critique of the economistic approach to environmental issues. But whilst I broadly agree with his conclusions, and with some of his specific objections to that approach, I shall argue that there are a number of significant problems with the conceptual framework he deploys, which at times both limit the persuasiveness of his critique, and make the task of developing an alternative to economism appear somewhat easier than it may actually be. I shall begin by considering his claim that economism fails to recognise the relevant differences between preferences and values.

2. THE ASSIMILATION OF VALUES TO PREFERENCES

Sagoff formulates the distinction between values and preferences in a number of rather different ways (see chs 1 and 5). But the basic distinction seems to be this: when we make moral, political, aesthetic or other such 'value-judgements' (a term which Sagoff does not himself use, but which seems quite appropriate here), we are expressing a belief or opinion about what is right or good; whereas when we 'express' a preference we are simply indicating what it is that we want or desire.

Elaborating on this: a judgment (or statement or claim) about values is, for Sagoff, something that can be said to be true or false, and/or for which we can give, or be expected to give, some kind of reason or justification. So in making such judgments we in principle open ourselves up to, and potentially enter, a critical debate (conducted in accordance with the virtues noted above) about the correctness or otherwise of these judgments – i.e. we engage in political (or moral, etc.) arguments, as citizens. By contrast, a preference is, as it were, simply a 'brute fact' about us, about what we want or desire – indeed, want or desire for ourselves, in pursuit of our private interests. Preferences, that is, are 'taken as given' in the sense that they neither require, nor (perhaps) can be given, any kind of rational justification.

However, says Sagoff, this distinction is systematically obliterated when environmental policy-makers, adopting an economistic approach, try to take account of the ways in which people 'value' the environment, over and above the more obviously 'economic' aspects of their relationships with it. The crucial move, here, is to extend the standard economic concept of 'externalities', especially external *costs*, beyond its relatively straightforward and narrow scope, so as also to include 'intangible' values/costs – such as people's aesthetic

appreciation of nature, or their 'valuing' of wilderness, kinds of natural landscape, or the 'sheer existence' of certain living species, and so on.

A simple example of this distinction between narrow and broad conceptions of externalities might arise in the case of river pollution. Suppose a firm discharges its waste into a river, but that further down the river another firm makes use of this water for its own productive purposes. The effect of the first firm's discharges is that the second firm has to purify the river water before using it itself. This is a straightforward case of externalities: the first firm is imposing a cost on the second, but there is no mechanism by which it has to pay for this itself – it does not have to count this amongst its own costs. This is a standard kind of market failure.

By contrast with this straightforward case, there may also, or instead, be people who attribute value to unpolluted river water: for instance, to the aesthetic qualities of sparkling streams or their ability to support various species of fish or plant-life. They may also regard such pollution as a desecration of nature, as something that it is inherently wrong or bad to allow; and so on. What Sagoff rejects is the attempt to conceptualize this latter case in the same manner as the former one: i.e. to regard these moral or aesthetic objections to pollution as constituting just another kind of external cost that can and should enter a cost-benefit analysis in the same way that external costs are dealt with in the former case. For this would be to treat people's values as if they were simply another set of preference; and this, he claims, is a fundamental conceptual error – what he calls, following Ryle, a 'category-mistake'.

The radical error involved here, Sagoff suggests, manifests itself in the considerable difficulties experienced by proponents of the economic approach when they actually attempt to include people's 'values' in a cost-benefit analysis (see ch. 4). For these to be included in the overall calculation of net benefits, some price must be put on these 'preferences' (e.g. for clean or unpolluted water). Otherwise they will not be 'commensurable' (though this is not Sagoff's term) with the more straightforwardly identifiable economic costs and benefits. So those who are potentially affected by the particular decision will be asked how much they are 'willing-to-pay' (WTP) to retain the existing environmental benefit, and/or how much compensation they would require if it were to be removed.

It turns out, however, that the answers people often give are highly resistant to this kind of attempted calculation: many people simply refuse to specify any finite sum at all, either objecting to the very question, or assigning infinite financial values. Advocates of economism tend to regard such responses as indicating the need to refine or revise their techniques, or as showing that people are behaving irrationally and/or unfairly ('strategically'). By contrast, Sagoff interprets them as indicating the absurdity of the questions; and he goes on to explicate the nature of the category mistake which this extended application of CBA essentially involves.

He does this partly through a number of supposedly analogous examples (pp. 92-4). To arrive at environmental decisions in this way, he suggests, would be like trying to decide whether a person on trial was guilty or not by discovering, before any evidence had been heard, what the preferences of the jury were in this regard, and then calculating the net benefits of the two possible verdicts; deciding whether creationist science, instead of Darwinian theory, should be taught in certain schools by finding out whether there were enough pupils/parents whose preferences for this were sufficiently strong, as indicated by their WTP, to cover the costs of providing this educational service; or determining the justifiability of the Vietnam war by finding out whether this policy produced more preference satisfaction than its alternatives, with people's moral judgments about the war being included alongside every other kinds of 'preference'.

Extrapolating from these examples to the environmental case, what the economistic approach implies is that the judgements people make about the (intangible) value of the environment, and/or about what it would be right or justifiable to do to it, are to be seen simply as statements about their individual preferences; so that, to the extent that the environment might be treated in ways that are odds with these judgements, this is seen simply as giving rise to a cost or disbenefit due the non-satisfaction of those 'preferences'. However, whilst I agree with Sagoff in objecting to this approach, I think it is worth distinguishing between two significantly different errors at work here, only one of which is captured by Sagoff's conception of a category-mistake.

Let us return to the river pollution example. We can distinguish here between two kinds of judgments that people may make about the river's value. (i) The first consists in their articulating the ways in which the unpolluted river contributes to their *own* well-being, as individuals – for instance, through the opportunities it offers them for aesthetic enjoyment. Here we are concerned still with what Sagoff would regard as 'private' interests. (ii) The other consists in their claiming that the river has some value 'over and above' such a contribution to their own well-being; e.g. by contributing to that of other people, or 'intrinsically', i.e. in non-anthropocentric terms. Type (ii) judgments would typically involve claims that it is morally right or desirable to preserve the river in its unpolluted form; but this would be less appropriate in the case of (i).

Now I would suggest that what Sagoff regards as the category-mistake applies to (ii), but not to (i). To treat type (ii) judgments as preferences, in an economistic fashion, is to misrepresent their character altogether.⁵ But there is a significantly different problem about the economistic approach to (i). This is to do with the commensurability requirement of the economistic calculations – or at least, with the specific version of this that involves 'putting a price' on everything (see O'Neill 1993, ch. 7).

As Sagoff points out (p.68), it is quite mistaken to think that everything we value can have its value expressed or measured in this way; indeed, often it is precisely by denying that a price can be put on something that we indicate how

highly we value it. For instance, when one refuses to put a price on keeping one's relationship with a friend intact, one is, *inter alia*, refusing to accept that the value of that friendship – its contribution to one's own well-being – is commensurable with that of the various commodities one can purchase. But this is quite different from the category mistake that would be involved if, for example, one said one believed it was right for people's friendships to be kept intact, and was then asked how great a price one would pay to see this principle maintained in practice.

Likewise, I suggest, when people refuse to put a (finite) price on the aesthetic value an unpolluted river may have for them, they may legitimately be expressing their sense that this is incommensurable with the value to them of various purchasable commodities. But when they object to its pollution by describing this as a desecration of nature or suchlike, they may be making a moral judgment that is not, at least directly, concerned with their own well-being – with the value the unpolluted river has for them. To treat such judgements as preferences is indeed a category mistake. But it is a different error from that involved in trying to put a price on non-priceable forms of individual well-being. Hence the fact that CBA's (price-measured) commensurability requirement often cannot be met poses a problem for economism even if we restrict ourselves to people's concern for their own well-being, one that is distinct from the category mistake of treating judgments about what is right etc. as the expression of individuals' preferences.

I shall not pursue this incommensurability issue any further. Instead, I turn now to some difficulties in the use Sagoff makes of the contrast between 'methodical' and virtue-based conceptions of rationality. In particular, I will suggest that his endorsement of the latter makes it difficult for him sustain the distinction between (value) judgements and preferences that he makes in criticising the category mistake noted above; for this requires there to exist what might be termed 'relevant considerations' in evaluating these judgments, something that a virtue-based account does not provide.

3. VIRTUES, METHODS AND RATIONALITY

If one considers the (non-environmental) examples of category mistakes noted above, and asks why it is that the preference-based procedure for making decisions appears so ludicrous, at least part of the answer seems to be this: that in each case we believe there are reasonably well established and relevant criteria by reference to which these decisions should be made, or which have some important bearing upon them; and that to replace these criteria by the calculation of net benefits defined in terms of preference-satisfaction is thoroughly inappropriate.

For example, in criminal trials it is assumed that there are certain rules of evidence to be employed in determining the accused's guilt or innocence, and that to allow any considerations other than these to affect the jury's decision is

irrational and likely to lead to unjust outcomes. Likewise, in the educational example, one would presumably regard the scientific credentials of creationist science, by comparison with its Darwinian counterpart, to be at least one key consideration; and this would also make the criteria for assessing competing scientific theories relevant in deciding what should be taught in schools. However, I suggest, Sagoff's endorsement of Rorty's pragmatist account of reasoning makes it difficult to justify this way of thinking about these examples, and hence to regard the preference-satisfaction approach as indeed involving a category mistake.

As noted earlier, Sagoff denies that rationality consists in the application of any 'method', and replaces this with the requirement that decisions be arrived at through the exercise of various moral virtues. But it would seem to follow from this latter conception of rationality that, although participants must listen carefully to one another's views, be honest and tolerant, and provide 'reasons' for their beliefs when asked, etc., no limits can be placed upon what can *count* as such a reason, since there are no 'objective' criteria governing what can be regarded as relevant considerations. And on this view it is hard to see, for instance, why anyone should have to accept that the scientific credentials of two opposing theories of evolution are relevant considerations – or indeed, what such credentials might themselves consist in.

What has gone wrong here, I suggest, is that Sagoff's classification of conceptions of rationality is seriously incomplete: that his dichotomy between virtues and methods is not exhaustive. He makes it seem as if, once we have rejected a 'methodical' conception of rationality, and hence the economicist approach to the environment which relies on this, there is nothing left but a virtue-based understanding of rationality. But this is not so. For there are alternatives to this virtue-based account that do not display what Sagoff takes to be the failings of rationality conceived as method.

Sagoff represents the advocates of rationality as method as believing that one can specify an essentially algorithmic, mechanical procedure which will generate determinate answers to the relevant questions – whether these are about the merits of competing scientific theories, or of different environmental policies. But to deny that there are such algorithmic methods does not entail that there is nothing to rely on but the virtues of honest debate; for there may instead be various substantive criteria that should govern such debates, even though their use cannot be governed by an algorithmic procedure.

This is most easily illustrated in the case of scientific argument. As Sagoff points out, the work of Thomas Kuhn and others has led many philosophers of science to abandon the project of constructing an algorithmic account of scientific rationality. But he does not note that by no means all of them have abandoned the possibility of specifying the main criteria that are relevant in judging the respective merits of competing scientific theories (see Newton-Smith 1981): that they have not simply replaced method by the virtues of open

debate. Indeed, it may be difficult to conceive of what such open debate would consist in – what would be seen as the appropriate terms of the argument – in the absence of such (albeit non-algorithmic) criteria.

For example, Kuhn himself has suggested the following picture of scientific rationality.⁶ In choosing between alternative theories, we assess them by reference to their predictive power, simplicity, consistency with other theories, the absence of apparent anomalies, and so on. But there is no guarantee that all of these specific evaluations will point in the same direction, i.e. will mark out one theory as superior to others in every respect. The application of these various criteria may instead conflict with one another; and scientists will then have to weigh up the pros and cons, and make what are inevitably inconclusively supported, often provisional, yet nonetheless rational decisions.

Partly because of this, there will be a need in such situations for scientists to exercise both a certain kind of 'judgment',⁷ and also the kinds of virtues to which Sagoff refers. But these, it should be emphasised, serve to supplement, and not to replace, an appeal to the accepted criteria for decision-making. So what we have here is the combination of non-algorithmic criteria with the role of judgment and the exercise of virtues: an account of rationality that belongs neither to the category of method nor to that of virtue. And it is arguably this, rather than Sagoff's recourse to the virtues alone, that should replace the economistic use of method.

But there is a further, and different objection to the way in which Sagoff argues against the employment of a 'methodical' conception of rationality in environmental decisions. Sagoff tends to contrast economism with an approach which sees such decisions as depending on questions of 'value', on ethical, aesthetic and other such considerations, and defends the latter against the former. The impression is thereby created that the economistic approach does *not* express or rely upon any such ethical or evaluative principles.

Yet this is misleading. For, whatever its defects, it seems clear that there is *some* such theory involved – a broadly utilitarian one according to which the right action is that which maximises aggregative human well-being, where the latter is itself understood as consisting in the satisfaction of preferences. Now it is a feature of this theory that, once its basic value-premise is accepted, all particular questions about right actions can in principle be dealt with 'methodically', by the calculation of overall preference-satisfaction. But what is objectionable about economism is not that it tries to answer such questions armed only with a method, and without any values: the methodical approach is simply a consequence of the ethical theory upon which it is based. Hence the crucial task is to show that this theory provides inadequate criteria by which the rightness of actions, including environmental decisions, is to be judged.⁸

The proper response to these inadequacies, however, is not to get rid of the idea of relevant criteria altogether, and rely solely on a virtuously conducted democratic debate. There would be no more prospect of arriving at ethically justifiable decisions in this way than there would, in the case of science, of

arriving at justifiable decisions about the merits of competing theories without any substantive criteria for their evaluation – as if absolutely anything might be relevant, and all that matters is to listen politely to one's opponents. There have to be criteria, even if there is debate about which are to be adopted.

4. CULTURAL VALUES IN PLACE OF METHOD

I have argued so far that, if one followed Sagoff in eschewing method, and accepted as exhaustive his dichotomy between methods and virtues, one would be left with nothing to rely on in conducting the kind of political, democratic debate about environmental issues that he advocates – and to which *The Economy of the Earth* should be seen as contributing. However, Sagoff does not himself attempt the impossible, i.e. to argue with only the virtues to help one. Instead, he appeals to the currently 'shared values' of the American nation; and these, he maintains, display a strikingly appreciative and respectful attitude towards nature, especially 'in the wild' – so much so that it functions as a symbol for what is arguably the central value of that culture, namely human freedom (see ch. 6). The economic approach to environmental decisions is, he argues, thoroughly at odds with these shared values of the nation; and it is by reference to these values that democratic debate about environmental policies should be conducted.

It is here that Sagoff's endorsement of some characteristic features of the 'communitarian' movement in contemporary political theory comes to the fore.⁹ Like other communitarians he rejects the more traditional philosophical attempt to construct foundationalist and/or universalist theories of value, and replaces these by an appeal to the historically contingent shared values and forms of identity of the local culture – in this case, those of contemporary (North) America.¹⁰

Now this communitarian appeal to local values arguably brings with it a number of equally characteristic difficulties, especially its apparent closure of radical critique and the related problems of cultural relativism. For instance, it might seem to rule out, in this context, any radical questioning of those values from an ecocentric standpoint – according to which, for example, the previously noted symbolic value of nature might be seen as an illegitimate projection onto nature of meanings derived from the local culture's understanding of human life. Likewise, an ecocentric anti-relativist might rhetorically pose the question of how an advocate of environmental protection might have fared at an earlier point in American history when, according to Sagoff's own account, these symbolic representations of nature were of a very different, and far more hostile kind.

However, despite my sympathies for them, I shall leave aside these anti-relativist objections, and focus instead on some difficulties for the particular way in which Sagoff relies on his own local culture.¹¹ Here it seems to me that Sagoff's account of the (currently) shared values of the American nation is

unduly selective and optimistic. For even if he has correctly identified the presence of positive and protective attitudes towards nature, there are surely other significant elements of that culture which make problematic any straightforward appeal to shared values as the basis of an adequate environmental policy.

Most obviously, I suggest, there is also the shared value of *consumption*. In calling this a 'shared' value, I do not mean that each individual believes in the value of their *own* activities as consumers, so that the 'sharing' of this value is just the summation of individuals' concerns for their own well-being. Rather, I mean that there is a widespread, shared belief in the value of consumption for everyone, a belief that what can be achieved through consumption is at least part of 'the good life for humans', and hence that 'the good society' is one that provides ample opportunities for people to enjoy these benefits, and indeed to an ever-increasing extent.¹²

For although the activity of consuming is itself a (largely) individual or private one, this is perfectly consistent with there being, at the level of the culture as a whole, a shared and public commitment to the value of this for everyone, and to providing the means for them to engage in it: individualism is, after all, a social or cultural phenomenon. That there is such a shared value of consumption in Sagoff's local culture I shall not try to argue for here. But one might note that, if one accepts the causal or explanatory significance of cultural values at all, it would otherwise be hard to explain why so much political attention should be given there to the educational, institutional and other requirements (including the existence of a competitive market economy, which is itself a public rather than a private good) for the material prosperity of 'the nation', and hence for generating those kinds of individual well-being (supposedly) achieved through consumption.

I have made this point so far in terms of 'shared values'; but it can also be made in the vocabulary of 'identity' which Sagoff, like other communitarians, often employs. Here one can note the widely accepted view of contemporary American society as a paradigmatic example of a 'consumer culture' (see Featherstone 1992) According to this view, it is not simply that, as individuals, its members believe in the value of their acts of consumption. Rather, it is claimed, their own sense of identity as individuals, of 'who they are', consists partly in their ability to engage in this activity; and this likewise forms part of their shared identity as 'Americans' etc. – and just as much, one might argue, as does their love and respect for nature.

Now Sagoff himself seems at times to deny that consumption is one of the shared values of American culture, or a part of its and its members' identities. For example:

America is not a nation of consumers; its people are not bundles of preferences in search of a perfect market. Rather, they are citizens who contribute to, and insist on, a more edifying and democratic conception of their commitment and their nation's destiny. (p.224)

But this seems a little fanciful. No doubt (many) Americans are not *just* consumers – but they are not just people committed to protecting their natural heritage, either. Nor is it clear that they would all accept that consumption is a less ‘edifying’ value than the protection of nature, or, as Sagoff elsewhere perhaps implies, that it is ‘trivial’ in its significance:

How many yo-yos should be produced as compared to how many Frisbees? Should pants be cuffed? These questions are so trivial or inconsequential or personal, it is plain markets should handle them. It does not follow from this, however, that we should adopt a market or quasi-market approach to every public question. (p.44)

But even if most consumers would agree that these particular questions are trivial, it does not follow that they think likewise about the overall value both to them, and to others, of living in a society in which, through the choices provided by a market economy, so much is made available to themselves and to others as consumers.

As I suggested earlier, the presence of a shared value of consumption ‘alongside’ that of nature in the relevant local culture poses certain difficulties for Sagoff’s recourse to shared values as the basis for environmental policy. For at least in concrete, practical terms there are likely to be considerable tensions or conflicts between these two values: the various policies and institutional designs that might be most effective in realising one of them may well have negative consequences when judged by reference to the other. And indeed, if one thinks of economic growth and development as justified primarily, or at least significantly, by appeal to their supposed contribution to human well-being through consumption, then it would seem that a considerable proportion of what we recognise as environmental problems can be regarded, at the level of cultural values, as manifesting precisely this conflict between ‘nature’ and ‘consumption’.

Hence the appeal to shared values does not, by itself, provide the basis for a satisfactory – more environmentally-protective – alternative to the economic approach. Instead it points to a conflict within the local culture which needs to be resolved in a certain direction if such an alternative is to be adopted, but without indicating how such a resolution might be achieved through the proposed vehicle of democratic political debate.

The claims I have made here also have some critical implications for Sagoff’s contrasts between the roles of citizen and consumer, and the pursuit of private v. public interests. As citizens, he says, we are concerned with the public interest, with our conception of the good society. As consumers, by contrast, we are concerned only with our individual, private interests and well-being. Yet consumption, I have suggested, is not merely something that we pursue as individuals: it is also a major element in the shared values of the local culture. So when, as citizens, people debate the nature and implications of their conception of the good society, they will find that a central element in that conception itself concerns the value attributed to consumption.

On Sagoff's view, once people detach themselves from their role as individual consumers, concerned only with the satisfaction of their private interests, they will find themselves thinking as citizens committed to the shared value of the environment's preservation. But this is unduly optimistic, since they will also find themselves committed to the value of consumption (and hence of economic 'progress' and 'development' etc.), and having to resolve the conflict between these shared, public values. Hence, what Sagoff represents as a tension within individuals between their roles as consumers and citizens might better be seen as a tension within the culture between the values of consumption and of nature – one that they have to address as citizens.

So the conflict between these values exists for people in their role as citizens, not between their (publicly-oriented) role as citizens and their (privately-oriented) role as consumers; and the necessary political debate is conducted by citizens concerned with the implications for everyone in society of resolving this conflict in one way rather than another. It is not that people value consumption as consumers and nature as citizens: rather, they value both as both – and the potential conflict between these values arises in both contexts.

If this is so, there must be something misleading about the way that Sagoff illustrates what he takes to be the nature of the tension between the roles of consumer and citizen. For example, he reports an 'experiment' with his students in which their responses to the proposed development by Disney Enterprises of a ski resort in a quasi-wilderness area of Sequoia National Park were explored. Asked whether they would visit such a resort, with all its consumer delights, many enthusiastically assented. But asked whether this development should be permitted, there was near unanimous dissent: the Disney plan was deemed loathsome and despicable, thoroughly at odds with 'the values we stand for as a nation ... [which] compel us to preserve the little wilderness we have...' (pp. 50-51).

Now Sagoff interprets this as illustrating a conflict between 'what the students as individuals wanted for themselves and what they thought we should do, collectively, as a nation', which was resolved in the latter's favour by prioritising their ethical and cultural values over their consumer interests. But a slight adjustment to the experiment would illustrate a different, and in my view more illuminating, location of this conflict. Suppose that the students had been asked to consider, not (just) their own interests in the proposed resort as potential consumers, but those of 'other' consumers, of 'any' such. Then they would have had to consider a conflict at the political level, between the shared values of both nature and consumption; and as citizens with respect to both, rather than as citizens with respect to nature (and 'values'), but only as consumers with respect to consumption (supposedly not involving 'values').

Of course, the preferred outcome of this latter conflict might have been the same: my point is simply that it is this that the political debate consists in – and indeed that there would be nothing inherently more 'private' or 'self-interested'

about resolving it in favour of consumption than there would be in the opposite direction, since a decision to 'favour consumption' would have been taken in the interests of all/any individual consumers, not just of 'oneself'. Furthermore, when we think about such proposed developments 'as individuals', concerned only with our own, private interests – and not politically, as citizens – we may expect to find a parallel potential conflict: between the qualitatively distinct, and typically incommensurable kinds of well-being that one might expect for oneself from the wilderness and the ski resort – a conflict which, as Sagoff rightly argues, cannot itself be resolved by a comparison of calculated net benefits measured in monetary, economistic terms.

5. POLITICAL DEBATE AND THE VALUE OF CONSUMPTION

For Sagoff, as we have seen, the terms within which the necessarily political debate about environmental issues is to take place are themselves set, at least in their main dimensions, by the shared values (and/or forms of identity) of the relevant local culture. So if, as I have suggested in the preceding section, there is a potential tension in that culture – between the valuing of nature and of consumption – this political debate will have to address, and find ways of resolving, this tension.

Now it is, of course, just conceivable that some means might be found by which both values could be realised without loss or detriment to one another. But this is highly improbable. Instead, some agreement will have to be reached about the relative significance that is to be given to the two competing values and their practical realisation: how much, and/or what kinds of economic development etc. are to be permitted, in aiming at consumption-benefits, where this would lead to the destruction or degradation of nature?¹³ Should we, for example, adopt a lexical ordering of the two values, so that whatever would otherwise be done to realise one will only be permitted if it in no way interferes with realising the other? Or should we, as the advocates of economism in effect suggest, find some way of determining the net benefits of the alternative policies that each value, taken by itself, would support? And so on.

How might any such proposals be justified? I shall confine myself here to noting how some of the issues considered earlier in this paper bear upon this question. Suppose, to start with, that one tried to argue for a 'reduction' in the degree of significance currently attributed to the value of consumption. Here a particular line of argument may initially seem attractive, yet turns out to be unsatisfactory. This would be to argue that little value can be attributed to consumption, since consumption consists merely in 'the satisfaction of preferences', whatever their character or rationale; and there is nothing about preference-satisfaction as such that demonstrates its contribution to human well-being. To show that the satisfaction of preferences is of value, one must first evaluate

the nature of the preferences concerned; but the preferences of consumers are not subject to such evaluation, and hence their satisfaction cannot be seen as inherently desirable.

The trouble with this line of argument is that it seems to depend on accepting the neo-classical representation of consumption as 'no more than' the satisfaction of preferences. But this itself is highly problematic. As Sagoff and others have noted, there is a marked tendency on the part of neo-classical theorists – whose work provides the main rationale for the economistic approach to environmental decisions – to deny that any evaluation of (consumer) preferences either can or should be made, and hence to present them as 'mere' preferences (see Keat 1993 and Sheffren 1978). Furthermore, it is by reference to this view of consumer preferences that the concept of efficiency is defined; and it is partly for this reason that Sagoff is able to argue, with some justification, that 'efficiency' – and hence the key criterion involved in economism – is not a philosophically defensible value (pp. 101-4).

But although neo-classical theorists refuse to make judgments about consumer preferences, there is no reason why we should follow suit. Indeed, it seems clear that consumers themselves make such judgments. Or at least, their 'preferences' are typically the outcome of judgments about the extent to which the purchase of particular items is likely to contribute to their own well-being; and these judgments are in principle open to critical evaluation, by themselves and/or others. But crucially, we cannot tell, in advance of a specific critical engagement with the character and rationale of actual consumer judgements, whether these are defensible, justifiable etc. or not. And it would therefore be unjustified to consign them, *a priori*, to the class of 'mere' preferences, if by this one meant 'based on poor or irrational judgements' – or even on none at all.¹⁴

In other words, for all one knows without further and substantive consideration of the merits of actual consumer preferences and their underlying rationales, what neo-classical theorists represent as 'mere preferences' might in fact be a good deal better than these terms would normally imply. One may, of course, try to show that the kinds of well-being people hope to achieve through consumption are either unachievable through that activity, or of less value than others with which it, or its various effects and implications, may be incompatible (see Lane 1991, Part VII). But there is no 'short cut' available here: there is a good deal more to consumption than neo-classical theorists allow one to recognise, and one cannot dismiss its possible value by reproducing, in one's own critique, the vacuity of their representation of it.¹⁵

However, although one must avoid this kind of short-cut in arguing 'against' consumption, it is perfectly legitimate to criticise those who attempt, in the kind of political debate being considered here, to justify placing a high value on consumption by appealing to its preference-satisfying character. In this context, one can appropriately refer to the kinds of objection Sagoff and others make to a conception of well-being as the satisfaction of preferences: without further evaluation of the specific nature of and/or rationale for these, there is little reason

to regard the satisfaction of a preference as of any value (see O'Neill 1993, ch. 5). And if this conception of well-being is then used to justify the adoption of an economistic approach to environmental decisions, one can add to this the various problems noted earlier about the incommensurability of (many of) the relevant 'preferences', the impossibility of measuring them by willingness-to-pay, and so on (see section 2 above).

Furthermore, if this preference-based account of well-being were itself proposed on the basis of the supposed 'subjectivity' of all value-judgments – a view which, as I suggested earlier, is partly responsible for the kind of 'category-mistake' Sagoff rightly criticises – it would be quite reasonable to respond in the following way: if all value-judgments are subjective, i.e. are beyond any rational justification or debate, then there is no more reason to adopt a preference-satisfaction account of well-being than any other, nor indeed to value human well-being however conceived. In other words, the subjectivist meta-ethics espoused by many proponents of economism more or less rules out their engagement in the necessary political argument about environmental values, including that of consumption.¹⁶

However, it is important to recognise that it is precisely *as* a possible proposal in a suitably conducted political debate about the environment that economism should be seen, and judged. It is true that, were this proposal to be accepted, all the particular decisions affecting the environment would then be taken out of the political sphere, and made 'methodically', with quasi-economistic expertise. But what is wrong with this approach is not, as Sagoff suggests, that it relies upon a mistaken view of rationality; nor that it requires us to think about environmental issues from the standpoint of our private lives as consumers rather than our public ones as citizens. For we just might, as citizens, agree on economism as the best approach to the environment. In doing so we would, in effect, be prioritising the value of consumption over that of nature, and agreeing to resolve the tension between these shared cultural values in a particular way.

This is not how Sagoff represents the possible adoption of economism: his framework of distinctions between citizens and consumers, public and private interests, values and preferences, and virtues and methods, leads him to conceptualise this in a different and, I have argued, less satisfactory way. Fortunately, however, he has also provided a number of powerful objections to economism which are detachable from that framework, and will hopefully play their part in the political rejection of this way of making decisions about the environment.

NOTES

¹ Earlier versions of the paper on which this article is based were given at two seminars organised by the Department of Philosophy and the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change at Lancaster University. The participants in the ensuing discussions may not recognise its present form; but they may recognise their own contributions to it, for which I am grateful.

² And also about many other issues of 'social regulation' which are not concerned with the environment, such as health and safety legislation.

³ I use this admittedly loose formulation of the concept of efficiency, rather than those in terms of Pareto-optimality etc., for the sake of simplicity: nothing that follows will hinge on the differences between them. On such definitions see e.g. Buchanan 1985 chs 1 & 2; and on cost-benefit analysis and welfare extensions of neo-classical theory, O'Neill 1993 chs 4 & 5. Here, and throughout this article, I ignore non-welfarist justifications of the market, which may be used to support approaches to environmental problems that differ markedly from economism: in particular, those based on property rights.

⁴ Sagoff quotes here from an unpublished (1984) manuscript by Rorty; but see also Rorty 1989 for a more recent and extensive presentation of similar claims.

⁵ The philosophical origin of this error probably lies in the tendency for neo-classical theorists to espouse a form of meta-ethical scepticism, according to which all value-judgments are no more than the expression of individual preferences (see Keat 1993). Once this view is adopted, there is no possibility of rational engagement with such judgments; and it may seem tempting to respond to them instead by trying to include them in a CBA. But this, in effect, is a case of 'killing them with kindness'; and it is arguable that the practitioners of CBA would do better simply to exclude them from their calculations.

⁶ And he explicitly draws parallels between this and the nature of political argument – not because the relevant criteria are the same, but because of similarities in how they function etc.: see Kuhn 1977.

⁷ Here I use the term 'judgment' in a special sense, implying the exercise of discriminatory skills that are not reducible to a set of determinate rules or procedures. Elsewhere I use the term in a more general way.

⁸ Sagoff himself makes a number of telling criticisms of this theory, especially of its preference-based account of human well-being, in ch. 5.

⁹ See especially pp. 118–123; and for an informative discussion of communitarian political theorists, Mulhall and Swift 1992.

¹⁰ Sagoff sometimes implies that reliance upon 'philosophical' theories of value will be as undemocratic as the use of an economic method. Yet there is no obvious reason why philosophers proposing such theories should not also accept the requirement of democratic agreement before their proposals are actually implemented.

¹¹ For a critical discussion of these problems see Norton 1987. However, I suspect that the philosophical opposition between relativist and non-relativist positions may often have less significance in practice than it does in principle. For when we look at the kinds of consideration that each (philosophical) party will regard as relevant or legitimate, in a particular context of debate such as the one we are now exploring, it may turn out that there is rather little difference between what each will refer to. This is because on the one hand, the relativist will usually allow a certain degree of 'critical reflection' on existing values and/or their supposed implications, as Sagoff himself quite rightly does, or will manage to discover some 'dissident' element in the local culture which endorses the critical standpoint they want to employ; and on the other hand, non-relativists will usually find themselves couching their arguments in terms that have at least some positive connection with existing values, if for no other reason than the pragmatic one of trying actually to persuade or convince people who belong to that culture.

¹² Here, as throughout, I simplify the discussion by ignoring the existence of 'counter-cultural' – in this case, anti-consumer – groups and values.

¹³ Obviously there are also other relevant values, such as liberty, distributive justice, etc., but these will be ignored in what follows. I will also assume that the practical conflict between nature and consumption values is likely to arise even if one takes account of consumer-benefits for future generations – and whether nature is valued anthropocentrically, for its contribution to non-consumerist forms of human well-being, or intrinsically.

¹⁴ Relatedly, although I agree with Sagoff when he says, in the passage quoted on p. 342 above, that we are not ‘bundles of preferences’, I do not agree that this shows we are not ‘consumers’: rather, it shows that this neo-classical representation of consumers is itself misconceived. It may partly be due to his implicit acceptance of this misrepresentation that Sagoff tends to map the distinction between preferences and values onto that between consumers and citizens.

¹⁵ Correspondingly, whilst standard proofs of the (ideal) market’s efficiency are rendered normatively insignificant by this same vacuity, the market might nonetheless actually provide consumer satisfactions that are genuine contributions to human well-being, more adequately conceived. It is a broader implication of the arguments of this paper that a successful rebuttal of economism would depend on a substantive critique of the value of consumption, and cannot rely on a meta-theoretical critique of its neo-classical underpinnings alone.

¹⁶ So too does their tendency to espouse the neo-classical model of the human agent as a rational, self-interested preference-satisfaction maximiser, since this rules out the possibility of conceiving politics as a debate about the public good etc.: see Elster 1986. But economism does not logically require this model, and its proponents would do well to reject it.

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