



## Ethics, Economics and Sustainability

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## Ethics, Economics and Sustainability

### Abstract

On the dominant economic approach to environmental policy, environmental goods are conceptualised as forms of capital that provide services for human well-being. These services are assigned a monetary value to be weighed against the values of other goods and services. David Wiggins has offered a set of arguments against central assumptions about the nature of well-being, practical reason and ethical deliberation that underpin this dominant economic approach. In this paper I outline these arguments and consider their implications for understanding ethical demands across generations. The paper focuses, in particular, on their implications for understanding the nature and requirements of sustainability.

#### 1.

Environmental policy making is increasingly dominated by a particular economic approach. Environmental goods are conceptualised as forms of capital that provide various services for human well-being. These services are to be assigned a monetary value such that their value can be properly weighed against the values of other goods and services. A policy of 'no net loss' allows aggregate levels of natural capital to be maintained: loss of one component of natural capital can be offset by a gain in natural capital elsewhere that provides the same services. The understanding of environmental goods as forms of natural capital that are to be assigned a monetary value has come to dominate policy making at international, national and local levels. The approach, it is claimed, is a requirement for rational choices about their future that will ensure the optimal improvement in human well-being.

In this paper I examine arguments which Wiggins offers that puncture this dominant economic approach to environmental policy. His work offers criticisms of central assumptions about the nature of well-being, practical reason and ethical deliberation that underpin the approach. In doing so it offers an articulation and defence of the ordinary human scale of values that the approach seeks to replace.

For mainstream economic theory, the source of environmental problems lies in the fact that the value of environmental goods is not captured in market transactions. They are 'externalities'. The solution is to ensure environmental goods are assigned a monetary value that reflects the strength of preferences for them. There are two ways this can be done. First, various methods can be used to ascertain shadow prices on the environmental goods, either by inference from behaviour in markets or by asking people what they would be willing to pay in some hypothetical market setting. Those values can then enter a cost-benefit analysis which mimics the outcome of ideal markets. Second, the goods can receive an actual monetary value by constructing a market for them, for example through the definition of tradeable rights to pollute and through the creation of tradeable assets in offsets. Emissions trading and biodiversity offset markets offer two notable examples. This approach to environmental problems is premised on a series of assumptions about the nature of well-being and practical rationality.

**The nature of well-being:** The standard welfare economics that underpins this approach to policy making starts with the characterization of human well-being in terms of preference satisfaction: 'the entire body of 'welfare economics' centres round the formal identity of the statement "X prefers A to B" and the statement "X has higher welfare in A rather than B"' (Pearce et. al., 2003 p. 121).

**Practical rationality:** Standard welfare models put some constraints on the preferences of a rational agent. Preferences jointly are to have a certain structure. They must meet assumptions of transitivity, completeness, reflexivity and continuity. Beyond these constraints on the structure of preferences, there is no deliberation to be had about ends. As Robbins puts it: 'If we disagree about ends it is a case of thy blood or mine' (1932, p. 53). Reason can only address questions about means. Agents are instrumentally rational. Utility is defined in terms of preference satisfaction. In conditions of uncertainty, agents are instrumentally rational in the sense that they choose that course of action which maximises expected utility. Public choices are similarly understood in terms of instrumental rationality. Different courses of action and economic arrangements are to be assessed in terms of how far they improve overall welfare thus understood.

**Commensurability:** Rational choices about different options require a single measure of value through which welfare gains and losses of different options can be compared. A virtue of the preference satisfaction theory of well-being is that it brings well-being under the measuring rod of money. The strength of preferences for marginal changes in a bundle of goods is captured in willingness to pay for a good or to accept compensation for its loss. As such, welfare gains and losses of different options can be measured. One can thus ascertain if losses in one dimension of goods can be compensated by gains in others, and hence which option best or most efficiently improves overall well-being. The possibility of such compensation underpins the Kaldor-Hicks compensation test for standard cost-benefit analysis: a situation A is an improvement over B if the gains are greater than the losses, so that the gainers could compensate the losers and still be better off.

**Aggregative consequentialism:** As will be evident from the above, standard economic approaches to decision making about environmental goods belong to the wider class of consequentialist and aggregative theories. The best policy is that which best or most efficiently improves the total welfare of affected parties.

Running through the work of David Wiggins are criticisms of these assumptions that underpin the dominant economic approach.<sup>1</sup>

**The nature of well-being:** Standard versions of economic welfare theory fail 'to differentiate between the satisfaction of desires that are relatively trivial (however strong or numerous they may be) and the fulfilment of vital needs' (Wiggins, 2006a, p. 46). The claim relies upon a defensible account of the concept of 'vital needs'. What is to count as a vital human need? An initial central distinction Wiggins draws is that between purely instrumental needs to have  $x^2$ , where  $x$  is instrumental to the achievement of an end that is itself optional, and absolute or categorical uses of the concept of need, where  $x$  is required for ends that are not optional but are 'unforsakeable' (Wiggins, 1998, pp. 6–11). If I say I need £4000 for a Caribbean holiday, one might obviously reply, 'do you really need that Caribbean holiday?'.<sup>1</sup>

If I say I need to have food to avoid hunger, or some set of goods to avoid being excluded from human companionship, the response will be different. I will be harmed if the need is not met. Meeting the needs is a condition of living a minimal level of human flourishing. The concept of absolute need is characterised thus:

I need [absolutely] to have x

if and only if

I need [instrumentally] to have x if I am to avoid being harmed

if and only if

It is necessary, things being what they actually are, that if I avoid being harmed then I have x. (Wiggins, 1998, p. 10)

Wiggins distinguishes a number of dimensions of absolute or categorical needs that matter for the nature of the claims they make on moral agents and public policy (Wiggins, 1998, pp.14–17): their gravity – how bad the harm involved is; their urgency – how rapidly action must be taken to avoid the harm; their entrenchedness – the degree to which the needs are fixed in any realistically envisagable and morally acceptable future; their basicness – the degree to which entrenched needs are grounded in ‘laws of nature, unalterable and invariable environmental facts, or facts about human constitution’ (Wiggins, 1998, p. 15); and finally their substitutability – the degree to which the harm of not having x can be mitigated by the agent having another good, u, v or w. Vital needs are absolute needs that are ‘grave, deeply entrenched and scarcely substitutable’ (Wiggins, 2006a, p. 33).

**The nature of practical reason:** Wiggins rejects the purely instrumental account of practical reason – ‘that pseudo-rationalistic irrationalism, insidiously propagated nowadays by technocratic persons, which holds that reason has nothing to do with the ends of human life, its only sphere being the efficient realization of specific goals in whose determination or modification argument plays no substantive part’ (Wiggins, 1998, pp. 223–4). The account of practical reason he offers is Aristotelian, drawing on the distinction noted by commentators on Aristotle between the external determinants of an end – means that are ‘causally efficacious in the production of a specific and settled end’ – and the constituents of an end – those things ‘whose existence counts in itself as the partial or total realization of the end’ (Wiggins, 1998, pp. 219–20). Central to practical deliberation is not simply the determination of causal means to some independently specified end, but the specification of the constituents of the end. Deliberation about causal means presupposes such a specification.

I shall characteristically have an extremely vague description of

something I want – a good life, a satisfying profession, an interesting holiday, an amusing evening – and the problem is not to see what will be causally efficacious in bringing this about but to see what really qualifies as an adequate and practically realizable specification of what would satisfy this want. Deliberation is...a search, but it is not primarily a search for means. It is a search for the best specification.

(Wiggins, 1998, p. 225)

Prior to any deliberation about the external means to a good life, one requires a specification of the constituents of the good life. Moreover those constituents themselves such as meaningful work, personal relationships will often in turn require specification.

**Commensurability:** Wiggins rejects the claim that practical rationality requires commensurability. Rational choices are possible in conditions of plural and

incommensurable values. The possibility of rational choice in particular circumstances is consistent with the denial of the assumption that there exists a general measure of value. The possibility of rational choice between options given plural values in some particular circumstances does not licence the assumption that there must be some general measure of value which can be used to rank options.

[C]hoices by which we make rankings are narrowly constrained by the circumstances of the choices. Once we appreciate this, real life feats of ranking will appear to fall short of licensing the ideal of any extrapolation to an underlying general ranking (or a context free 'indifference map', as I think I should say to colleagues in economics).' (Wiggins, 2006b, p. 210).

In particular circumstances of choice, the claims and demands of different and plural values made on a person might be such that a rational agent exercising practical wisdom can rank the different options A and B. However, it does not follow from this that there is a general metric through which these claims and demands can be traded off for all circumstances of choice (Wiggins, 1998, p. 368). Options A and B are incommensurable 'if there is no (however complicated or conditionalized) correct, unitary, projectible, explanatory and/or potentially predictive account to be had of how A and B trade off against one another in some reasonable agent's choices or actions, or with the formation of his springs of action' (Wiggins, 1998, p. 370). The claim that in any circumstance there is a way of ranking options does not entail that there is way of ranking options in any circumstance. The inference exhibits a logical fallacy, a shift from a statement of the form  $\forall \exists$  to one of the form  $\exists \forall$ . Wiggins states the point thus in a comment on a passage in Aristotle's *De Anima* which might be mistaken for a claim about commensurability:

There is no question here of supposing that there is just one evaluative dimension  $\Phi$ , and one quantitative measure  $m$ , such that  $\Phi$ -ness is all that matters, and all courses of action can be compared by the measure  $m$  in respect of  $\Phi$ -ness. What is assumed is only the weaker proposition, which is of the  $\forall \exists$  not the  $\exists \forall$  form, that for an  $n$ -tuple of courses of action actually available at time  $t$  to an agent  $x$  there is some way or other of establishing which member of the  $n$ -tuple is the better course of action in respect of eudaemonia, and (consequently upon that) the greater good. There is no obvious inconsistency between holding this *De Anima* doctrine and maintaining the thesis of value pluralism or incommensurability in the form of the denial of the  $\exists \forall$  sentence. (Wiggins, 1998 pp. 258–59)

Practical rationality is exhibited in an agent's bringing to bear the various values that matter in a particular context of choice and understanding which matter and how they matter in that context (Wiggins, 1998 p. 233 and pp. 378–79). The existence of plural and incommensurable values entails that a rational choice can involve losses for which no compensation is possible (Wiggins, 1998, p. 359).

**Aggregative consequentialism:** Against consequentialism, Wiggins defends the reasonableness of an ethic grounded in solidarity as articulated by Philippa Foot – an ethic that refuses to sanction 'the automatic sacrifice of the one for the good of the many' (Foot, 1985, p. 86 cited in Wiggins, 2006b, p. 240). Developing remarks of Weil, Wiggins argues that solidarity is grounded in the mutual recognition of persons as persons. Solidarity is the source of aversion to acts that appear 'a direct assault by one personal being on another' (Wiggins, 2006b, p. 246). The solidarity of humans to humans grounds prohibitions, acts that are forbidden. The argument provides additional force to claims of need. Solidarity conflicts

with aggregative principles that override the vital needs of the losers for the general benefit (Wiggins, 2008, p. 12). In a phrase that Wiggins employs: 'forbidden does not stand for a form of disvalue' (Wiggins, 2008, p. 14). Harms to vital needs of those affected by actions and projects are not forms of disvalue to be weighed with benefits in a cost-benefit analysis. Prohibitions to such injury are rooted in mutual recognition of persons as persons.

Wiggins' criticisms of the assumptions of dominant economic approaches have important implications for environmental policy. Wiggins' articulation and defence of the significance of vital needs had its origins in the actual impacts of cost-benefit calculations in the justification of road building in the 1960s, where benefits measured in terms of monetary values assigned to preferences for savings in journey times, through the sheer number of journeys involved, overwhelmed costs involved in the loss of thousands of homes in which 'ordinary human lives of passable urban contentment were already being lived, and in which it was possible to satisfy after some fashion a huge variety of familiar human needs' (Wiggins, 2006a, p. 27; cf. Wiggins, 2011, pp. 193–97).

In this paper I focus on the implications of his arguments for understanding ethical demands across generations. Environmental damage has a strong intergenerational dimension. The impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and other forms of environmental damage will fall most heavily on future generations. In the standard economic approaches, debates about these intergenerational impacts appear in two central debates. The first debate concerns the practice of discounting. Cost-benefit analysis weights costs and benefits differently depending on the time at which they occur – benefits and costs in the future are given a lower value, the further into the future, the lower the value. The discount rate is justified either by appeal to pure time preferences, or to the assumption that future generations will be wealthier than current generations and hence that the marginal value of additional consumption is lower in the future, or both. Debates focus on the justifiability of the appeal to pure time discount rates and, given growth and inequality adverse policy over generations, how far adjustments should be made on the assumption future generations will be wealthier. The second debate concerns the nature of sustainability. Sustainability is understood to be about maintaining levels of well-being over time 'so that it might improve but at least never decline (or, not more than temporarily, anyway)' (Pearce, 1993, p. 48). Sustainability thus understood requires that 'we leave to the future the option or the capacity to be as well off as we are' (Solow, 1993a, p. 181). To do so we are to pass on a stock of capital that is at least as good as that received. The standard debate then runs about the mix of capital assets. Does sustainability only require that the total aggregate level of capital, human-made and natural, be maintained (weak sustainability) or is there some critical level of 'natural capital' that must be maintained which cannot be substituted for by human-made capital (strong sustainability)?

Wiggins' critical response to the standard welfare economics approach to policy making has implications for relations across generations. The defence of an ethic grounded in solidarity on the one hand rules out the sacrifice of one generation for the sake of future generations (2008, p. 12). On the other, it rules out the sacrifice of the vital interests of future generations on the grounds of current superfluous consumption: '[M]ost of our obligations to the civilization of the future and to the future condition of the earth itself are essentially negative and prohibitive. They concern what we must not do' (Wiggins, 2011, p. 181).

Threats to the vital needs of those in the future are not forms of disvalue to be weighed with values in an intergenerational cost-benefit analysis, where the only question is what the appropriate discount rate should be (Wiggins, 2011 section 8 and passim). Negative duties to avoid harming those in the future do the ethical work. The priority of meeting needs over the satisfaction of desirable but forsakeable ends also grounds a version of the precautionary principle applied to future projects – the Pushkin principle that we should not ‘risk that which is (or will be) necessary to human life in the hope of acquiring the superfluous, i.e. that of which we have no vital need’ (Wiggins, 2006a, p. 50). Finally, it offers the basis for defending a strong version of the Brundtland definition of sustainable development - one that ‘counts as sustainable only developments that meet the needs of the present without at all compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Wiggins, 2006a, p. 48).

Wiggins’ endorsement of the Brundtland definition of sustainability is one of three characterisations of the concept that he offers. He also cites, with reference to Solow’s paper ‘Sustainability: An Economist’s Perspective’, the following characterisation of sustainability:

we...leave our descendants with as large and as good a resource base as is available to us and bequeath them the same freedom as we have to make our own decisions about how to be, what to do, and how to live.’ (Wiggins, 2006a, pp. 46–7)

Wiggins elsewhere offers the following more minimal definition of sustainability:

In my usage a policy is sustainable just if it leaves as large and good an environmental resource base as it inherits from its predecessors. (Wiggins, 2000, p. 18)

The rest of the paper is organised around responses to each of these definitions. In the next section I consider some of the implications of the Brundtland formulation. Section 3 explores the second freedom formulation. Section 4 considers how far the third resource-based formulation does justice to Wiggins’ own elaboration of the concept. I will suggest that this elaboration and other of Wiggins’ arguments outlined above point to the limits of a concept of sustainability defined in terms of resources alone.

## 2.

Consider Wiggins’ strong formulation of the Brundtland characterisation of sustainability: we should count as sustainable ‘only developments that meet the needs of the present without at all compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. A significant difference between this characterisation and that of more recent economic characterisations – that well-being should not decline - lies in the theory of well-being assumed. The Brundtland formulation characterises well-being in terms of needs. Standard economic approaches define well-being in terms of preferences. What difference does this make? One immediate difference concerns the possibilities for the substitutability of goods for each other. If well-being is a matter of preference satisfaction, then substitutability is a matter of maintaining agents’ overall level of preference satisfaction. A bundle of goods A is a substitute for bundle B if replacing B by A leaves an agent’s overall preference satisfaction the same. The agent is said to be indifferent between the two bundles of goods in the sense that they are equally preferred. This preference satisfaction account of well-being allows for a large degree of substitutability. Substitutability is contingent on the wants people happen

to have. As Brian Barry states it: 'For someone who adopts want-satisfaction as a criteria all resources are in principle fungible: if plastic trees are as satisfying as real ones, there is no reason for worrying about the destruction of the world's trees so long as the resources exist to enable plastic replacements to be manufactured in sufficient numbers' (Barry, 1999, p. 102).

A needs-based account of well-being allows for much more limited substitutability. Vital needs are marked by their being 'scarcely substitutable'. Given a vital need for  $x$ , the harm of not having  $x$  cannot be mitigated by the agent having another good,  $u$ ,  $v$  or  $w$ . If a person is suffering from severe malnutrition then they have an immediate need for particular nutrients. While there will be some substitutability between the different sources of such nutrition, other goods required to meet other vital needs, say materials for education, are not substitutes. Two more general points can be made here. First, the concept of categorical need is a threshold concept. There are lower levels to what a person can be or do that characterise a minimally decent life. Second, needs are plural. There exist a variety of distinct dimensions of categorical needs related to different minimal thresholds of well-being. Together these rule out certain kinds of substitutability across different dimensions of need. If an agent suffers a marginal loss in some dimension of need that takes her below the minimal threshold in that dimension, then it is not the case that there will be some marginal gain in some other dimension of need that can compensate for that loss. If a person is suffering from malnutrition then nutritional goods are required to meet that need. Goods that meet some other needs such as education and housing will not be substitutes.

These limits to substitutability have implications for what sustainability requires. If sustainability is about meeting the needs of future generations, then it requires each generation to pass down bundles of goods and conditions of life that are disaggregated across the different dimensions of human need (O'Neill, 2010; Gough, 2015). It requires the conditions for life and livelihood, for good health, for social affiliation, for the development of capacities of theoretical and practical reason and so on. Each dimension requires distinct goods to meet them – the formal and informal educational institutions required for the development of the capacities for theoretical and practical reason, the physical, environmental and cultural conditions for social affiliation within communities, the environmental conditions for food production and so on. Different human needs require specific and non-substitutable goods for their realisation. The non-substitutability of natural and human-made goods at the centre of debates between weak and strong forms of sustainability are just particular instances of these more general limits on substitutability.

To make these claims is not to deny the existence of significant causal relations between losses in different dimensions of need. Limits in an agent's capacity to control her life in the workplace can be a cause of ill-health (Marmot, 2004). Relative social standing, loss of independence and lack of access to education are related to nutrition, health and life expectancy for women (Sen, 1992a). However, any remedies to those compounded deficiencies must ultimately address the specific deficiencies in each dimension. The existence of causal relations is consistent with the claim about the limits of substitutability of goods across different dimensions of need. What the existence of causal relations does show is that while, given limits to substitutability, goods passed on must be disaggregated, they must come as necessary members of a larger set of causally related goods.



Neither do these claims underplay the role that the possibility of technical forms of substitution has for sustainability. While there are limits to substitution between goods required to meet different dimensions of need, substitutability is possible within dimensions of need on how needs are met. That possibility is a condition of sustainability. Sustainability requires such substitutability if vital needs are to be met in ways that have lower environmental impacts. We require forms of energy to meet vital needs. The substitution of sources of energy from fossil fuels with high greenhouse gas emissions with sources that have lower emissions such as wind and solar power is a condition of our meeting those needs sustainably.

### 3.

A second characterisation of the concept of sustainability Wiggins outlines is this:

we...leave our descendants with as large and as good a resource base as is available to us and bequeath them the same freedom as we have to make our own decisions about how to be, what to do, and how to live. (Wiggins, 2006a, pp. 46–47)

We leave future generations with conditions for the freedom to form their own decisions about how to be, what to do, and how to live. How should this characterisation of sustainability in terms of resources for freedom be understood?

One way it shouldn't be read is as a version of the economic textbook anti-paternalist argument for a preference-based approach to policy – that we should simply pass on the resources for future generations to satisfy whatever preferences they have. This argument is inconsistent with the appeal to needs in a principle of sustainability. There are good independent reasons to reject it. The first is epistemic. We can know the needs of future generations, but not their preferences. The second is an intergenerational version of the problem of adaptive preferences (Sen, 1992b, p. 55). What people come to prefer is dependent on what is available to them. What is left to future generations will not simply satisfy preferences but shape them. Given adaptation, there are far fewer constraints on what it is acceptable to be left to future generations. The loss of biodiversity, the disappearance of blue skies in a geo-engineered world will not necessarily matter on a metric of preference satisfaction, since the preferences of populations can be expected to adapt accordingly. They become background conditions of life. Debates on what we are leaving future generations are not and could not be neutral as to the content of preferences. As Barry puts it in developing objections to want satisfaction approaches to sustainability, 'substantive disputes about the concept of sustainability reflect disagreements about what matters' (Barry, 1999, p. 102).

A different interpretation of Wiggins' second formulation might be to take it be closer the position Barry defends. Barry defends the view that liberal neutrality should be extended across generations. It should not be the purpose of current choices to promote any particular conception of the good. Our obligations are 'to provide future generations with the opportunity to live good lives according to their conception of what constitutes a good life' rather than being concerned with providing them the 'chance to lead a good life as we conceive it' (Barry, 1999, pp. 103–104). Correspondingly, the conditions passed on 'must be such as to sustain a range of possible conceptions of the good life' (Barry, 1999, p. 105). This provides a reason for passing on goods required to meet vital needs and interests in

nutrition, health, housing, clothing and education that must be met on any conception of the good. Beyond this, other goods necessary to satisfy a range of specific conceptions of the good are also included. For example, it must offer environmental options other than an increasing array of consumer goods. Thus he claims that we 'should leave open to people in the future the possibility of living in a world in which nature is not utterly subordinated to the pursuit of consumer satisfaction' (Barry, 1999, p. 105). However, the aim is to provide future generations with 'the opportunity to live good lives according to their conception of what constitutes a good life', not with some specific conception of the good life.

What is to be made of this argument? An initial observation is that accepting the value of practical reason and autonomy as a constituent of what makes for a good life is consistent with a rejection of liberal neutrality (Raz, 1986; O'Neill, 1998, chs.5–7). Autonomy, the capacities for practical reason to make and form the direction of a life, is a central human good. That this is the case constrains what sustainability requires for reasons noted in the last section. The good of autonomy requires not simply a general resource base, but a range of specific social, institutional and material conditions that need to be passed down that allow the development and exercise of capacities for practical reason. A perfectionist can agree that it is neither desirable nor indeed possible for any generation to impose a single conception of the good life on future generations. However, it does not follow that it is either possible or desirable to pass on an array of options that will allow future generations to pursue whatever conception of the good life they happen to hold. The problems of knowledge and adaptation made of preference based versions of sustainability also arise for intergenerational neutrality. First, in the absence of knowledge of some part of their conception of the good life, it would not be possible to specify what options would allow them to pursue that conception, beyond a minimal list of primary goods that are necessary to pursue any conception of the good. Second, the options that are passed on will shape future conceptions of the good life. How future generations will conceive of the good life is in part dependent upon the social and natural conditions of life that are left to them. For that reason debates about what we leave future generations in terms of social relationships, cultural goods, natural and cultural landscapes and consumption opportunities are already debates between different current conceptions of the good life. Such debates are unavoidable. Barry, in specifying what goods should be left, already presupposes some account of what a conception of the good life might include. He does not advocate passing on a full variety of plastic trees within concreted landscapes in artificially lit shopping malls so that future generations might also have an option to lead a conception of life that could be lived with minimal contact with the natural world. Some options are deemed more desirable to be passed on than others.

The options passed on to future generations reflect conceptions of what the central goods of life should be. In this sense, the environmental goods passed on are no different from the cultural goods and political and social relationships that are passed on as a legacy to future generations. They reflect conceptions of what the goods of life will be. As such they will shape future conceptions of the good life. However, they should not determine that outcome. The relationship between generations is at best one of deliberation rather than coercion, a part of the dialogue about the nature of the good life that crosses generations. Different voices are expressed through the particular goods passed on to the future. Those who advocate passing on an ancient woodland do not do so with the aim of giving future

generations the options of either maintaining it or pulping the wood for paper tissues, any more than a particular canon of literature is passed on to give future generations the options of reading and appreciating it or pulping it for recycled kitchen tissue. Environmental goods are passed on in order to sustain particular voices in debates about conceptions of the good (cf. Norton, 2003, pp. 439–42). To say this is not to say that any conception of the good is the final word. Conceptions of the good will and should change, but they should do so as part of a dialogue across and within generations. Arguments about what should be passed on to future generations are arguments about the nature of the goods that are constitutive of the good life (O’Neill, 2015).

#### 4.

A third characterisation of sustainability Wiggins offers is this: ‘a policy is sustainable just if it leaves as large and good an environmental resource base as it inherits from its predecessors’ (Wiggins, 2000, p. 18). There are a number of questions that might be asked about this characterisation, in particular as to how ‘as large and good’ is to be interpreted. At least part of the answer, given the endorsement of the Brundtland formulation, does capture a central component of sustainability: it is the requirement to leave the conditions for those in the future to meet their vital needs. The debates on sustainability are framed by the potentially catastrophic harm to those in the future by actions in the present. Climate change, biodiversity loss, the passing of thresholds in the environment to absorb waste, and various other major forms of environmental degradation threaten the ability of those in the future to meet their vital needs and even the conditions for their existence. Deliberation about sustainability needs to be centrally about the conditions that are a causal means to the very possibility of a minimally good life (O’Neill et al., 2018.) Resources, understood widely to include the full array of those causal conditions, are for that reason properly at the centre of deliberation. However, Wiggins’ arguments on practical reason remind us that practical reason concerns not just the external causal means to the good life, but prior to this, the specification of the constituents of the good life. I will argue that reflection on the constituents requires us to go beyond a purely resource based characterisation of sustainability. Moreover, Wiggins’ own elaboration of the third characterisation of sustainability moves in this direction.

In outlining his ‘economist’s perspective’ on sustainability Solow defines sustainability in terms of resources. Something is valued as a resource if it is valued instrumentally, as the causal means to some desired end. Resources are ‘desirable for what they do, not for what they are’ (Solow, 1993b, p. 168). As such, one resource is substitutable by another if it does the same thing, either if it performs the same function technically in production processes or if it has the same impact on welfare. ‘It is their capacity to provide usable goods and services that we value. Once that principle is accepted, we are in the everyday world of substitutions and trade-offs.’ (Solow, 1993b, p. 168). For this reason Solow suggests that sustainability should not be concerned with the preservation of any particular object. While he does allow for ‘rare exceptions’ such as the Grand Canyon and the Lincoln Memorial, he claims that concerns about sustainability are not concerns with particulars: ‘The duty imposed by sustainability is to bequeath to posterity not any particular thing – with the sort of rare exception I have mentioned - but rather to endow them with whatever it takes to achieve a standard of living at least as good as our own and to look after their next generation similarly’ (Solow, 1993b, p. 168). Solow’s view underpins the characterisation of

sustainability in terms of maintaining a stock of capital, human made and natural, that runs through the economic literature on the topic. Capital is valued for the services it provides. Natural capital is a portfolio of assets valued for the ecosystem services it provides, either directly to satisfy human preferences, or indirectly as inputs into production or the background condition for production and human life. While Solow's view is traditionally put on the weaker side of the debates between weak and strong sustainability, both sides of the debate share the assumption that environmental goods should be understood as capital valued for their services.

A purely resource based account of the value of environmental goods, like a purely resource based conception of social goods, misses important dimensions of how such goods can matter to a good life. Relationships to people and places matter to us not just as external causal means to a good life. They are constituents of the good life. Consider friendship. To say that friendship is necessary for a good life can be understood in two different ways. One is that friendship is a necessary causal means to various goods. Discussions of friendship as a form of 'social capital' are framed in this way, in terms of the improvements in job prospects, income, physical and mental health and the like that 'social networks' bring. While these claims may be true, if you valued friends simply as capital, then so much the worse for your friendships. Friends matter as ends in themselves. Friendships are relationships to particular people who we value for what they are, not simply for what they can do for us. If friendship was valued simply as a causal means for such goods and services, then friends would be substitutable by others. Relationships to friends are not like that. The loss of a close friend or a family member does not have a substitute that might provide the same goods and services. It is the loss of a particular person and relationship that mattered as a significant constituent of our lives.

Similar points apply to the characterisation of environmental goods as 'natural capital'. Relationships to particular places and landscapes can similarly be central constituents of a good life (O'Neill, 1993, pp. 23–24; 2015, 2020; cf. James, 2016). The environments embody personal and social histories that matter to individuals and communities. Many of the struggles by communities to protect landscapes and places from commercial development are defences of particular places that matter for these reasons. For a community that have lived for generations by a particular river or a particular forest, their loss to a dam or to clearing for beef cattle is not simply the loss of the 'provisioning services' provided by the river and forest – important as they are. It is also the loss of a particular place that has embodied the lives and work of a community over the generations. It is their relationship to that particular place that matters. Their loss does not have a substitute by another object which offers the same 'provisioning services'. What is articulated in response to the development is precisely the way that the relationships to the place matter as part of the lives of members of that community.

Consider an example I have used a number of times before, the response of a community to their valley being flooded for a dam:

You tell us to take compensation. What is the state compensating us for? For our land, for our fields, for the trees along our fields. But we don't live only by this. Are you going to compensate us for our forest? ... Or are you going to compensate us for our great river – for her fish, her water, for vegetables that grow along her banks, for

the joy of living beside her? What is the price of this? ... How are you compensating us for fields either – we didn't buy this land; our forefathers cleared it and settled here. What price this land? Our gods, the support of those who are our kin – what price do you have for these? Our adivasi (tribal) life – what price do you put on it? (Bava Mahalia, 1994)

Provisioning activities such as fishing and growing vegetables could here be understood purely instrumentally. However, if that is the case, to the question 'for her fish, her water, for vegetables, what is the price of this?', there is an obvious answer – the price is the price of fish and vegetables that can be bought as replacements. However, this would clearly miss the point of the response. Certain provisioning activities are not simply instrumentally valuable, of importance only for the products. The activities themselves, the skills and capacities involved in them, become central constituents of the life of the community.

The practice of such activities, the development and passing down of skills across generations, are not simply external means to a good life. They form activities and relationships that are significant human goods constitutive of a way of life. These forms of livelihood form part of a culture that is embodied in the landscape. The community, culture and landscape are not separable items. The loss of this place to a dam is the disintegration of community and human goods of human affiliation associated with it. The relationship to this particular place matters for this reason. It forms a constitutive condition for the life of the members of the community. There is no compensation for its loss.

This is true also of many ordinary rural and urban environments that matter to people. When Wiggins makes reference to 'the close knit urban and social fabric' of cities destroyed by road building projects (Wiggins, 2006a, p. 26) it is particular places which are central to the lives of people that matter. The ways such places matter has been apparent in interviews I recently did for a project on green spaces and well-being in Manchester. What is evident is the way ordinary places matter to local people. The histories of these places need not always be long – although one threatened place contained ancient Nico ditches. Some of the most interesting and significant places – both for their biological richness and for the life of local communities - were until recently landfill sites left neglected to run wild. However, their significance partly lies in the way that local people came together to transform them into community spaces, where the often spontaneous succession of woodland, meadow and wildflower is recognised and fostered. It is no consolation for those struggling to save ordinary places rich in these personal and natural histories that matter to them and their community to be told by authority and developer that despite their disappearance there would be 'no net loss', or even 'net gain', in natural capital. The aggregative principle of no net loss policies fails to recognise the losses involved (O'Neill, 2020).

After the definition of sustainability in terms of leaving 'as large and good an environmental resource base', Wiggins offers the following comment:

Since few policies will be sustainable absolutely, let us interest ourselves in the comparatives "more/less sustainable". Let the first indicators of sustainability be agreed by ecological economists. For purposes of the drafting of some further indicators, let me commend the following: "There are four kinds of loss. There is loss of beauty, especially the exquisite beauty of the small and complex and unexpected,

of frog-orchids or sundews or dragonflies. There is the loss of freedom, of highways and open spaces...There is the loss of historic vegetation and wildlife, most of which once lost is gone for ever: to recreate an ancient wood is beyond human knowledge, though we might recreate a historic grassland if we were to live to the age of 200... [There is] loss of meaning. The landscape is a record of our roots and the growth of civilisation. Each individual historic wood, heath, etc. is uniquely different from every other, and each has something to tell us." Pp. 25–26, Oliver Rackham, *History of the Countryside*, Dent 1986. (Wiggins, 2000, p. 18)

The 'further indicators' that Wiggins' examples suggest here take the account of sustainability beyond the resource based characterisation from which he starts. The losses noted by Rackham are losses of particulars that are valued for the natural and human history embodied within them. They matter not just for what they do but what they are. The loss is not simply the loss of a resource. Relations to particular places matter to well-being. This is not the rare exception that Solow suggests but an everyday part of ordinary life. In defining sustainability in terms of resources, Solow argues we value environmental goods for 'what they do, not for what they are'. Resources are valued simply as the external causal means for goods and services. As such they are substitutable by others that provide the same goods and services. Hence sustainability, with a few exceptions, is not concerned with particulars: 'It is not an obligation to preserve this or preserve that' (Solow, 1993a, p. 186). This account misses this historical dimension of environmental value. Resources, the external causal means to meet vital needs, matter. However, they are not all that matter. Environmental goods are often valued for what they are, for the natural, social and personal histories they contain and the significance of this history for ongoing relationships and projects. They are valued as particulars that do not have substitutes since no substitute contains that history. In a report to the The Countryside Council for Wales, Alan Holland and Kate Rawles offered this characterisation of nature conservation: 'nature conservation is...about preserving the future as a realisation of the potential of the past . . . [it] is about negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of . . . significance' (Holland and Rawles, 1994, pp. 45–46). The account offers the basis for a broader understanding of the concept of sustainability (O'Neill et al., 2008, p. 201). It is one that is closer to that offered by Wiggins when he calls upon Rackham's account of environmental losses of landscapes rich in natural and human history.

This dimension of sustainability is not one that rules out change. One failure of the heritage industry is to freeze places at an arbitrarily chosen point and to remove places from a continuing historical narrative. Nor is this historical dimension of sustainability blind to the conflicting and more troubling histories contained in a place. Rather, it reveals them. The highlands of Scotland valued for their wildness are depopulated landscapes from which brutal exclusions took place. Monuments to the aristocrats who evicted the people are proper objects of controversy about their continuing presence (O'Neill et al., 2008 p. 157). Finally it is important to note that none of the argument entails that losses of environmental goods and relationships are never justified. Not every relationship to a particular place or environment has the same significance. And where a relationship has significance for some community, it might be that development is required to meet some other vital human need (cf. Wiggins, 2000, p. 18). Where other vital needs are at stake, loss is sometimes justified. However, it is to be recognised for what it is. It is not simply a want

that goes unsatisfied for which an appropriate level of compensation can be set. It is a loss for which there is no compensation.

### **Postscript**

As a postscript I want to finish by considering the implications of the arguments in the last section for the question of whether and how the future matters for us now. It is a question that Hume's publisher, Strahan, asked in a letter to the dying Hume: 'why are we on a variety of occasions, so much interested in what is to pass after our deaths?' (Strahan to Hume August 1, 1776, in Hill 1888). Strahan in the letter offered two answers to his question. The first concerned posthumous reputation: 'I see clearly, your reputation is gradually rising in the public esteem. – A flattering circumstance this, even in the decline of life; and when by the unalterable course of nature, nothing will soon be left of us but a Name.' (Ibid). The second is that in the work we do the future matters: 'do we not, in most of our labours, regard posterity, and look forward to times long posterior to our existence here?' (Ibid). The two answers are echoed in quieter tones in an observation of Wiggins on the concern to survive: 'When the desire not to cease to exist comes to accept its own long-term futility, it can be commuted into all sorts of distinctively different sorts of desire to leave traces: to be remembered by friends and pupils, to live on in one's work'. (Wiggins, 1998, p. 310).

Hume's own attitude to the desire for fame and posthumous reputation displays ambivalence (Sabl, 2006; O'Neill and Salter, forthcoming). On the one hand he has regard for 'literary reputation' and describes 'love of literary fame' as his 'ruling passion' (Hume, 1987, 'My Own Life' xl). He held that the desire of fame and reputation was ethically unobjectionable (Hume, 1998, 8.11). By making the agent survey their own actions through the eyes of others it can foster virtues (Hume, 1998, 9.1.9). On the other hand, the 'impatient desire of applause', the desire for fame and reputation divorced from virtues for which it is owed, is a form of vanity (Hume, 1998, 8.11). Smith makes a similar observation about the desire for 'groundless applause' in drawing the distinction between 'the love of praiseworthiness' and 'the love of praise'. To desire to be praiseworthy is to desire those characteristics or achievements for which praise is due: 'to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is ... the natural and proper object' (Smith, 1982, III.2.1). The love of praise for its own sake, divorced from the characteristics and objects for which praise is due is vanity: 'To be pleased with groundless applause... is properly called vanity' (Smith, 1982 III.2.4). The forms of vanity that move consumption in commercial society corrupt the moral sentiments (1982 I.iii.3.1).

For Hume, the desire for posthumous reputation is informed by the concern for the value of the work for which praise is due. While 'prejudice may give a temporary vogue' to an author, posterity offers a more disinterested perspective from which to properly evaluate when reputation is deserved (Hume, 1987 'On the Standard of Taste' p. 233). This thought that posterity offers a more disinterested standpoint on the value of a work might be thought to offer an answer to the question of why we 'in most of our labours, regard posterity'. However, it is an answer that does not convince. The claim that posterity offers a disinterested perspective free of the prejudices of temporary vogues has its problems. Later generations have their own temporary vogues which distort perceptions of the value of

work. And who knows what barbarism the future will bring and with it the perspective that it might offer.

A different answer is one that emerges from the last section with respect to everyday projects and relationships. Posterity matters where projects and relationships which are central constituents of a good life have a future beyond the lives of those engaged in them. Such projects can include the more mundane and everyday activities of labour and work involved in meeting livelihoods and sustaining social relations that link different generations of past, present and future. It is through engagement in those projects that require cooperation over generations that a common human world is created and sustained. For at least some forms of skilled working activity, workers engage in projects that have been passed down from those in the past and need to be continued into the present, for example in the maintenance of walls, the completion of a building started, the felling and planting of trees. Projects engaged in now depend on those in the future for their continuation.

Similar points apply to the intellectual landscape. A work has value as a contribution to a continuing conversation that crosses generations and it is for this reason that labours can have an eye to posterity. John Benson once passed on to me the remark that the greatness of Aristotle lies in his commentators. The point is not one critical of Aristotle, but rather an observation on what makes his work of value. The work matters in virtue of the debates which it fostered and to which it contributed. The same is true of Hume. It is in this way that posterity matters. Wiggins' own commentaries on Aristotle and Hume have been of benefit to the work of both authors. The value of the work itself depends on the activities of generations to come. Projects engaged in now depend on those in the future for their continuation. For those activities it is the case that 'in our labours [we] regard posterity'. A central problem is the diminishing place for many such activities in modern market societies. The subordination of all goods and productive activities to market competition is a central source of the temporal myopia of existing societies (O'Neill, 1993, ch.3). Human labour and relationships are treated simply as means to maintaining and increasing income streams. The increasing marketisation of education in the UK and the rise of quality audits with five to seven year periods in which excellence is to be measured are examples. In such circumstances one must hope to keep the conversation going beyond such metrics. My hope in this paper is to have contributed in a minor way to the ongoing conversations which the work of David Wiggins deserves.

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<sup>1</sup> To criticise this particular economic approach is not to criticise economic approaches as such. There are economic approaches that are congruent with Wiggins' criticisms, in particular in the tradition of ecological economics. The work of K. William Kapp, for example, offers an account of policy which starts with needs and social minima. This work owes much to Otto Neurath's criticisms of market based approaches to economic theory

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and their defence of a market economic order (O'Neill and Uebel, 2015). A comparison of the work of Neurath and Wiggins points to many parallel claims and arguments. Neurath's multi-dimensional approach to human well-being has much in common with the needs-based account that Wiggins defends. Neurath shares Wiggins' rejection of the pseudorationalism of approaches which assume value commensurability. He is in consequence, like Wiggins, critical of technocratic approaches to policy making that assume that there is some 'optimum' this or that to be discovered by planners. In his defence of 'planning for freedom' he objects in particular to technocratic forms of urban planning. His own work with the Vienna Settlement movement and in the housing projects in Vienna in the 1920s embraced the recognition of the plurality of different ways in which a good life could be lived and the need for people themselves to be engaged in deliberations about the shape of their lives. In this also Neurath's approach is not very distant from Wiggins' own reflections on the limits of a particular kind of town planning. There are differences. While there are some parallels in their accounts of human well-being, in the end Neurath takes his multidimensional approach to well-being to be grounded in an Epicurean subjective state account of the nature of wellbeing that is not consistent with Wiggins' needs based approach. On this my views are with Wiggins. On the other hand, Wiggins' criticism of markets is less radical than that of Neurath. He claims that 'the wisdom of the market, once extended outside the sphere where it belongs, will in practice subvert education, ethical formation, public spirit, and concern for the environment' (Wiggins, 2006b, p. 289). Neurath is more sceptical of the very idea of the 'the wisdom of the market'. On this my views are closer to those of Neurath (O'Neill, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Wiggins in a later paper reflecting on Sen's capabilities approach notes that the verb-phrase in the characterisation of absolute needs should not be limited to the particular verb-phrase 'to have x' (Wiggins, 2006a, pp. 31–32).