

“[P]ublic goods are not like private goods. As already noted, environmental features affect other people, they raise ethical questions which are of necessity public in character, and they often form part of the ‘common good’. Forming attitudes towards them is therefore a different kind of process from forming attitudes (preferences) towards private goods. It involves reasoning about other people’s interests and values (as well as one’s own) and the weight which should be given to them; about the application of and conflict between ethical principles in particular circumstances; and about the nature of the society one wishes to create or sustain. ... Attitude formation towards public goods is therefore a *public* not a *private* activity. It is an activity appropriate to a ‘forum’ not a ‘market’: to a public place where debate can be engaged in, arguments put on both sides, persuasion allied to tested facts. This is why democracy does not just consist in the provision of ballot boxes amid silence. Democracy is about public debate: the franchise is exercised only after citizens have heard all sides of the argument and discussed them with their family, friends, and workmates.” (Michael Jacobs, “Environmental Valuation, Deliberative Democracy, and Public Decision-making Institutions, 219-220)

Questions for discussion:

1. What is instrumental rationality, and what is its major malfunction?
2. Is it correct to say that economic approaches operationalise “private” as opposed to “public” reasons?
3. To what extent would a genuinely deliberative society be able to equip itself with efficient solutions to public goods and environmental solutions?
4. Is problem-solving the point, though? If not, where does that leave the environment?

To revolt or not to revolt? That is the question.

For a theory that emphasises publicity, deliberative democracy is curiously difficult to understand. The democracy that it describes is not one many of us would recognise: its goal would not be to discover our preferences (which modern economists take as synonymous with our well-being) but rather to transform us into truly autonomous, reasoning creatures. The deliberative citizen would not be *Homo economicus*, but rather *Homo politicus*, or even *Homo ecologicus*. But what would effect that transformation, and how valuable would it be? The most straightforward theories assume that, like all deontological reasoning, deliberative truths would appear by virtue of the fact of deliberation itself. When people approach each other as objects worthy of mutual respect, and as equal subjects in the project of self-determination, they will see (perhaps with a bit of prodding from someone with a political philosophy PhD) that they have a duty to find reasonable compromises with those with whom they disagree.

This may get us far as Arendt’s *Homo politicus*; but does it get us all the way to *Homo ecologicus*? In a simple world, where our impacts on the environment were all directly tied to our intentions (much as the prospects of the foetus largely rely on the intentions of the mother), compromise would surely be enough. But is that the world we live in? One reason to think not is that type 1 deliberation is not the only kind “on the market”. The other kind originates from the Marxist project of trying to uncover the structures hidden by false consciousness. But if such a thing as false consciousness is possible, compromise is not sufficient. We need to ensure that our compromises reflect the (true) common good. But how do we identify the common good? Deliberation is once again the solution: if people can be rescued from the obscurantism of instrumental reason, they will be able to self-legislate according to the *true* values of the species.

Does this solve our problem? It depends, I suspect, on whether the environment is a problem of discovering the right “values”, or coping with our ignorance. How would deliberation resolve the problem of ignorance? It is an unspoken assumption in all democracies that citizens *just know* what’s good for them. But if that’s true, why do they need to be governed by public policy experts? And are we really convinced that just freeing someone from the shackles of ideology somehow gives them access to social science truths? (Is *that* why social scientists can’t agree amongst themselves?)