PHD THESIS SUMMARY:

Beyond green and mainstream: on the normative foundations of environmental policy.

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How should we deal politically with environmental public goods? This dissertation examines three influential political-economic approaches to this question, in order to reveal their commonalities, relevance, and limits. I begin by analysing how environmental problems are understood from a political-economic perspective. Environmental problems are collective action problems over common pool resources. This collective action structure is reiterated on different levels, namely a long-distance spatial, an intertemporal, and an intrapersonal one (e.g., procrastination). The combination of these structural problems makes solutions for (some) environmental problems extremely difficult: it makes for a 'perfect storm' (see, Stephen Gardiner 2011).

In order to handle the wide diversity of approaches to dealing with environmental problems, I started with the most obvious approach, namely the one used by those specialised in environmental issues, environmental scientists and activists. In general, their political approach is based on the natural sciences: they look at the objective features of environmental public goods. As a political theory, this approach largely resembles utilitarianism. Therefore it is no surprise that they are confronted with similar normative and political problems with respect to distributive justice (since distributive issues are invisible in aggregates) and democracy (since there is only one policy priority).

The most significant political claim made by the environmental-scientific approach is of physical limits-to-growth. However, the claim of limits-to-growth, while intuitively self-evident, is hard to make solely on theoretical grounds. Moreover, even empirical limits-to-growth accounts do not always offer much policy guidance. On the one hand, they are too crude because of their aggregative nature and their assumption of continuity (and thus substitutability). On the other, they vary widely in

their conclusions because different indicators deal with different aspects. Therefore environmental policy requires, first, indicators beyond aggregation and continuity. In particular, indicators need to reveal which problems are 'preconditional', such as threatening basic needs or the sheer possibility of cooperation. Second, in order to move from descriptive to normative claims, indicators need also a political theory in order to fill in the idea of 'preconditional'.

In general, an environmental-scientific approach has many difficulties with the idea of plural valuations. The second—economic—approach offers a solution for this. It does not focus so much on the objective nature of environmental public goods, but on their subjective valuation as expressed in individual preferences. Ideally, a method of evaluation offers a way of converting these preferences to a common scale in order to allow for comparisons and decisions. In order to be successful, comparisons need to be made between goods, across persons and through time. This, again, brings forward problems associated with utilitarianism. An account concerned with choosing the policy that maximizes welfare requires converting all information into commensurable units, which need to be homogeneous, anonymous, and non-temporal. These requirements come up against problems of comparability (valuations that are different in kind), interpersonal comparison, and discounting.

However, economists do not use such a pure method of evaluation, but one that uses market prices, namely cost-benefit analysis (CBA), a method which is omnipresent in environmental policy. While CBA works for market goods, the underlying utilitarian problems return if one has to create prices for non-market goods. CBA becomes more controversial the more morally significant differences between separate goods, persons, and moments become. Unfortunately, such differences are often characteristic of environmental public goods. Incorporating such differences seems to demand a more deliberative method of decision-making rather than an aggregative one.

Economic preference-based approaches have problems considering value pluralism (valuations different in kind). The third—political-theoretical—approach focuses on the plurality of value systems or comprehensive doctrines rather than on individual preferences. A political-theoretical approach, such as liberal egalitarianism, is conceived as an answer to the political challenges of distributive justice in a context of value pluralism. It distinguishes between a just

procedural framework and the democratic debate between comprehensive doctrines within this framework, a distinction not made by the two previous approaches.

Here the question is whether particular environmental public goods relate either to the just framework or to the debate between different conceptions of the good. This distinction allows the development of accounts of how to deal with the distributive impact of environmental public goods and of our duties towards the environment. CBA does not make this distinction and considers all problems as a matter of the good, which is a general problem with utilitarianism. However, while a political-liberal analysis can draw the line between the just and the good, thereby providing a framework for decision-making, it is limited with regard to the content and institutions of environmental policy (which are respectively dealt with by the two other approaches) and the structural analysis of environmental public goods.

These three approaches conflict with one another on several issues, partly because they are dealing with different dimensions of environmental politics, respectively the preconditions of cooperation, methods of decision-making, and a just framework. Nonetheless, despite their divergence, they all share a common feature, namely a commitment to the idea of neutrality, respectively derived from objective science, value-neutral economics, and the idea of political neutrality. While valuable, such neutrality has its limits as a normative basis for public policy and in particular for environmental policy. Examining these limits, primarily through internal criticism of the different approaches, is the focus of this dissertation. Identifying these limits creates a general framework for dealing with environmental public goods. While broad, such a framework bridges the current gap between so-called ‘green political theory’ and mainstream political and economic theory.

REFERENCES

Gardiner, Stephen M. 2011. *A perfect moral storm: the ethical tragedy of climate change*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stijn Neuteleers obtained his PhD in philosophy from KU Leuven, Belgium. He was supervised by Antoon Vandevelde (Institute of Philosophy). He is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Research

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