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**Wealth, Well-being and Value(s): A Proposition of
Structuring Concepts for a (real) Transdisciplinary
Dialogue within Ecological Economics**

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Richesse, valeur(s) et bien-être : une proposition de concepts structurants d'un (vrai) dialogue transdisciplinaire au sein de l'Economie Ecologique

Résumé

Cet article propose des outils théoriques pour relancer le débat portant sur la nature de la valeur des ressources écologiques qui nourrit encore des tensions structurelles au sein du courant de l'Economie Ecologique. Il défend l'idée que la posture critique – vis-à-vis de la valorisation économique – d'« incommensurabilité des valeurs » peut être renforcée par une relecture des débats sur la question de la définition de la richesse au sein de l'économie politique du XIXème siècle. La remise en cause de l'idée et du concept de valeur économique pour les catégories non marchandes débouche, de manière symétrique à la littérature au sein du courant précité, sur une discussion à propos du rôle des notions d'utilité, de bien-être et d'intérêt dans la recherche 'transdisciplinaire' d'un modèle pertinent de l'acteur humain.

Mots-clés : Economie Ecologique, valeur, économie politique, richesse, bien-être.

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Abstract

This paper provides theoretical tools for discussing some aspects of the nature's value controversy within Ecological Economics. It is argued that the critical stance of 'incommensurability of values' can be reinforced with key insights coming from a political economy of wealth inspired by Ricardo and Marx. Having dismissed any reference to the idea of economic value for non-market goods, it remains to outline the role of notions of utility, welfare and interest for giving a richer model of the human actor in a transdisciplinary perspective.

Key words: Ecological Economics, value, political economy, wealth, well-being

JEL : Q51; Q57; B10; I31

1. Introduction

The issue of the value of ecological resources is mostly representative of the dispute on the frontiers of Ecological Economics (EE), e.g. either being a reviving branch of neoclassical economics, or encouraging a ‘socio-ecological economics’ (Röpke 2005). The supremacy of neoclassical economics as a scientific form of valuation has indeed induced two behaviours. One part aims at enlarging the use of its concepts and methods. The other part refers to a massive stream of criticism on ethical and political grounds.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this critical movement by providing tools for discussing two theoretical aspects: (1) the substantive content of notions of economic value, commodity and money in a sociohistorical perspective; (2) the connection with the field of the contemporary approaches of well-being. In this perspective, the core idea is that this critical movement has neglected the old origins of the ‘neo-classical value theory’. It is argued that the route of a *political economy of wealth*, grounded on Ricardian and Marxian insights, has to be explored as a mean to establish a transdisciplinary dialogue – with some economists too!

Section 2 of this paper briefly reviews the main existing approaches on nature’s value within EE. Section 3 reviews the way many ecological economists have (mis-)understood the 19th century political economy. Section 4 starts its rehabilitation with the Ricardo-Say controversy on riches and value. Section 5 introduces the Marx’s dialectic between ‘value’ and ‘use-value’. Section 6 connects these insights with the debate on the nature of the value of ecological resources. Section 7 outlines some areas of discussions and further researches. Section 8 concludes.

2. The value of Nature: views of ecological economists

The principles of the ‘economic valuation’ approach have already been widely discussed and criticized (see Vatn 2000). We will just refer to two of them in relation to aspects that will be discussed later: (1) commensurability of values underlying human valuation (2) commodification.

The link between ‘welfare economics’ and ‘economic valuation’ is direct. The former is supposed to provide the means to assess the “potential change in utility” resulting from a change in the level of provision of an environmental good (Carson *et al.* 2001: 174). The welfare implications, whatever the drivers, are expressed in terms of the monetary amount which would require to be taken from – willingness to pay (WTP) – or given – willingness to accept (WTA) – to the agent to maintain its overall level of utility.

What is often put aside in discussions is the old assimilation between utility and ‘exchange-value’ which was the cornerstone of the marginalist revolution as a response to the Ricardian stance. Since then, in neoclassical economics the word *value* has been assimilated to price. Hence, the only way of “considering the value of non-market commodities” (ibid: 173) is to define shadow prices and assume for people the possibility of trading-off them against money reflecting “others things [they] value” (Turner *et al.* 2003: 494).

As pointed out earlier, this approach has suffered from various treatments in EE. First, a generalisation of the use of its concepts and methods is pushed through collaboration between some economists and ecologists, that allows the former to enlarge their acceptance of the notion of ‘natural capital’ (see Azqueta and Sotelsek 2007).

By expanding a market-based theory, neoclassical approach has also run into massive critiques on ethical and political grounds. First, it is argued that values that inform environmental choices can express deontological ethical views of the environment which is at odds with the consequentialist assumption that the only thing that counts is the drawn individual benefit (Vatn, 2000). Then it makes the question of the institutional context in which the environmental values are expressed crucial: from their ethical and political status environmental goods are blocked from exchange in markets and from being treated as if they were market commodities: “to put a price on an object has a cultural meaning: it can be felt as an act of betrayal of a moral commitment” (O’Neill and Spash 2000: 528). There is a call upon other “value articulating institutions” that will allow individuals to express their values in an appropriate manner (deliberative and participative fora).

This search for theoretical legitimation of a sovereign space for ‘environmental values’ can be reinforced with a *political economy of wealth* that the neoclassical assimilation between utility and price has evicted from economics. The only distinction between use-value and exchange-value, from which derives the one between wealth and market value, gives the impetus for an autonomous space for non-market categories that are valued by individuals.

3. The misunderstanding of political economy within ecological economics

Within EE, classical conceptual systems devoted to deal with their main field of inquiry – the theory of value and distribution – are marginalised because they are considered as the reflection of the espousal of an anti-ecological industrialism, downplaying capitalism’s reliance on materials and energy, and reducing wealth to labour. Generally speaking, the intellectual and analytical foundations of EE have *a priori* eliminated classical economics and Marx (see Burkett, 2006) from its backgrounds. It has undeniably undermined the growing rejection of monetary valuation and has permitted neoclassical approach to gain a wider audience that it would have had otherwise.

Let us rely on some available investigations about theories of value. Prior (1998: 425) argues that “Classical economists never overcame the problem of separating value as an objective, embodied property and as a property dependant upon human perceptions”, so they were dogged by “the problem of separating objective and subjective aspects of utility”. Gowdy and Erickson (2005: 212) assert that “Until the middle of the twentieth century there was a lively debate in economics about varieties of value, including use vs exchange value (...). However, in the second half of the twentieth century, the field of economics adopted a narrower notion of value, limited to value in market exchange”.

Being endowed with such statements, which can be at best thin and at worst false, numerous works have solely established their criticism of the treatment of environmental goods as commodities on frames deriving from ethics and political philosophy. The air having been cleared of the easy motives for exclusion, it is time to demonstrate the potential contribution of old theoretical traditions to this criticism.

4. The distinction between riches and value: the Ricardo-Say controversy

A brief detour by this controversy aims drawing attention to some insights in relation to actual paths of thinking about the value of nature.

The cornerstone of Say's doctrine is the rejection of Smith's distinction between use-value and exchange-value (hereafter value). According to him the only value is price, which is "utility of thing and not production costs which make value" (Say 1996: 428).¹ He argued that "it is by giving [to a thing] utility which [it] hadn't that we give it value", and that "it is by increasing the degree of utility which was located when we acquire them that we increase their value" (ibid: 314). Thus, "price is the measure of value of things, and their value is the measure of their utility" (ibid: 39). The word "value" so labelled: "*Exchangeable value* and *riches* are synonymous" (Say in Ricardo 1970: 231).

Even in 1815, Ricardo had presented its core argument against Say's theory:

"You have I perceive a little modified the definition of the word *value* as far as it is dependant on utility, but with great difference, I observe, that I do not think you have mastered the difficulties which attach to the explanation of that *difficult world*. Utility is certainly the *foundation of value*, but the degree of utility can never be a measure by which to estimate value. A commodity difficult of production will always be more valuable than one which is easily produced although all men should agree that the latter is more useful than the former". (Ricardo, *Works* vol. VI: 247-248).

Thus, utility, as the connection between properties of an object and one's need, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for it to have an exchange-value.

In Chapter XX of his *Principles*, he went further regarding Lauderdale's idea that if water, previously *gratis*, became the exclusive possession of an individual, then it would increase not only his riches – because water would have a value – but also the aggregate wealth composed of individual riches. Ricardo stated that it would undoubtedly increase his riches. However, "the [new] proprietor of water is benefited precisely by the amount of [the] loss" of the members of other societies who are now "poorer by the whole quantity of commodities which they are obliged to devote for [the] purpose" of buying it. Then, the same quantity of "necessaries and comforts of life" are "enjoyed by the whole society, but they are differently distributed" (Ricardo 1970: 223). Consequently, the creation of value does not result from a novel production or from an additional production of early products, but from a transfer of a thing hitherto *gratis* into the market sphere. It is at best a different distribution of riches. It would increase an erroneous measure of wealth aggregating all market values... *Wealth is thus outside the scope of market calculus.*

In connection with this, in his reflexions, Say never managed to clarify the early inconsistencies quoted by Ricardo: he never overcame the contradiction which consists in simultaneously asserting that value entirely rests on utility and that 'natural riches' – all things from which utility is derived apart from market categories – have no value. Nevertheless, these paths contributed to shunting the car of economics away from the classical on to a different track which was to lead to marginalist theory. Let us just rely on the Jevons' reasoning about 'value' and wealth:

"There exist many useful things which cannot be transmitted from a person to another (...). Also, it is in reality impossible to buy or to sell the love of parents, the esteem of friends, the happiness of a peace of mind. Wealth can make a lot of things, but it cannot ensure these goods more precious than pearls and rubies' (...) Political economy does not pretend to examine all the *causes of happiness* and these *moral riches*, which can neither be bought nor paid, do not form part of wealth in the way that we will understand it". (Jevons 1878: 16).

He first linked the idea of wealth to happiness and its (very) determinants but he needed to reduce it to market categories in order to found his "mechanic of utility" as the foundation

¹ Translated in French by the author. Concerning the quotations of Marx, I used the website www.marxists.org to find the English translation.

of price. On that base, the notion of utility had to be conceptualized to penetrate the mathematical universe: by stating that ‘Pleasure and pain are the ultimate objects of the Calculus of Economics’, Jevons (1926: 57) made allegiance to the Bentham’s view, posed as being the very nature of welfare.

Ricardo was well-off enough with his basic concepts for not having to pursue the debate with Say. The fact that he said nothing more on utility than the capacity of things to respond to the “necessaries, conveniences, and enjoyments of human life” was not a theoretical thinness. The notion of wealth is left with its etymological sense: *the conditions of well-being*; and thereby a boulevard is open. Amongst these, we can wonder why we cannot find Jevons’ ‘moral’ treasures, or the justice of patterns of income distribution, or the stability of habitats for endangered species? Marx, by deepening the distinction between ‘use-value’ and ‘exchange-value’, had provided additional tools to lay out this route.

5. ‘Value’ and use values in the Marxian critique

The main source of insights is the analysis of the commodity that Marx had developed in the first chapter of Capital. The commodity is the *particular* form taken by a part of ‘goods’ in capitalist society. As ‘use values’, they satisfy human needs in coincidence with their physical existence, this property *not being as such an economic category*², and they are absolutely incommensurable between them. As ‘exchanges values’ they have only quantitative determinations. The equality between commodities means that we treat them as different quantities of something that they have in common. This common substance of commodities is the *labour* which has created them.³ The critique of Smith and Ricardo on that matter was necessary because their doctrine let believe that all kinds of concrete labour could confer a ‘value’ on goods.⁴ The twofold aspect of commodities reflects the twofold character of works producing them: the concrete works are not immediately socially useful without the *exchange mediation*; and exchanged works are not the concrete ones but works that Marx called “abstract”. The first has qualitative differences but as “abstract” labour, all works count only as “productive expenditures of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc., [which] in this sense are both *human labour*” (Marx 1994a: 572).

These “abstract” works are the substance of a phenomenon that is deprived of any content as such – it is purely social: the ‘value’. The latter expresses itself monetarily by ‘exchange values’ and the end of its course is a *quantity of money* coming to enlarge capital: money, under capitalist conditions, can be interpreted as the “*social institution* without which the sell of the commodity on the market could not exist” (Harribey 2004: 82), e.g. the ‘value’ would not be validated and could not take the money-form.

² “Whatever its social form may be, wealth always consists of use-values, which in the first instance are not affected by this form. (...) Although use-values serve social needs and therefore exist within the social framework, they do not express the social relations of production. (...) To be a use-value is evidently a necessary prerequisite of the commodity, but it is immaterial to the use-value whether it is a commodity. *Use-value as such, since it is independent of the determinate economic form, lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy.*” (Marx, 1994b: 278, emphasis added).

³ The value-labour theory was scarcely contested at this time. The marginalist’s refutation argues that the value of a commodity can be better determined by its “marginal utility”. For whom who have had the patience to read the work of Jevons, abundant in calculus on “*total utility*”, “*final degree of utility*” and “*ratio of Exchange*”, will have been surely surprised to read this passage:

“It may tend to give the reader confidence in the preceding theories when he finds that they lead directly to the well-known law, as stated in the ordinary language of economists, that value is proportional to the cost of production. As I prefer to state the same law, it is to the effect that the ratio of exchange of commodities will conform in the long run to the ratio of productiveness, which is the reciprocal of the ratio of the costs of production.” (Jevons, 1926: 186).

⁴ “That the economists, without exception, have missed the simple point that if commodity has a double character – use value and exchange value – then the labour represented by the commodity must also have a two-fold character, *while the mere analysis of labour as such, as in Smith and Ricardo*, etc., is bound to come up everywhere against inexplicable problems. This is, in fact, the *whole secret of the critical conception*” (Marx and Engels 1975; 186, emphasis added).

This short detour was necessary for understanding the following Marx's statements:

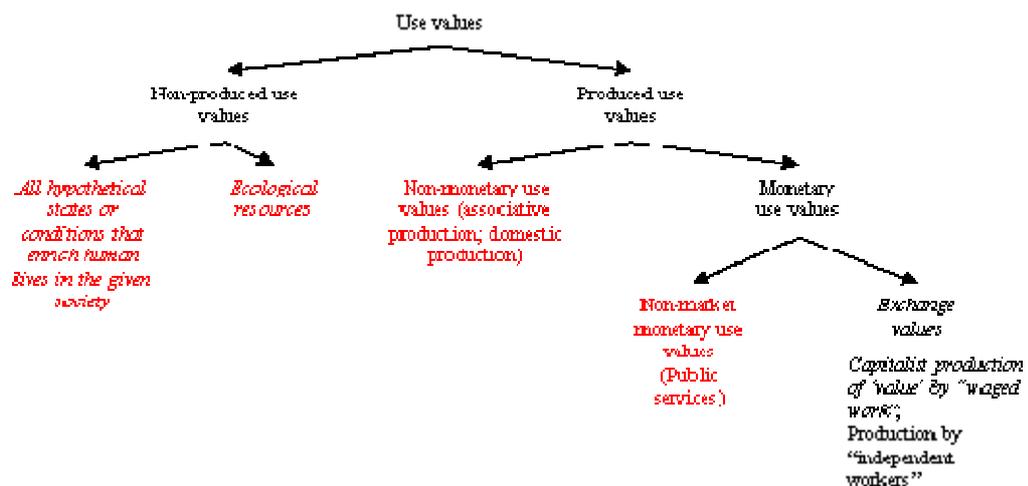
"A thing can be a use-value, without having value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not due to labour. Such are air, virgin soil, natural meadows, etc. A thing can be useful, and the product of human labour, without being a commodity. Whoever directly satisfies his wants with the produce of his own labour creates, indeed, use-values, but not commodities. In order to produce the latter, he must not only produce use-values, but use-values for others, social use-values. Lastly nothing can have value, without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value" (Marx 1994a: 568).

"Their *social* relation consists exclusively in this: they count for each other as expressions of that social substance which is theirs, expressions which differences are quantitative, not at all qualitative, and, therefore, replaceable by one another and exchangeable with another." (Marx in Dognin 1977: 77).

"The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities'" (Marx 1994a: 561).

The first passage permits to draw a primary picture of a broad conception of *social wealth*:

FIGURE 1. A Marxian typology of categories of social wealth (modified from Harribeay 2004)



The 'value'/use-value dialectic contains the phenomenon of *indifference* of the former to the latter which however constitutes its "body": the means that society uses to achieve its qualitative goals have become an independent power and all production of 'use values' is merely a mean for only one finality, e.g. disposing of a greater amount of money. The real production is only "an unavoidable intermediate link, as a necessary evil for the sake of money-making" (Marx *Capital*, Vol. II 1976: 52). According to Marx, the 'value' is just a form of social organization and its production does not enrich society: "Not too much wealth is produced. But at times too much wealth is produced in its capitalistic, self-contradictory forms." (Marx *Capital*, Vol. III 1965: 270). In the meantime, he thought that we should not call it "wealth" because "the self-valorisation of capital – the creation of surplus value (...) is utterly miserable and abstract content" (Marx in Danguenville 1971: 143). Thus, the Marxian analysis of capitalist accumulation process started with and had been entirely founded on that of the primacy of the 'value' on 'use-value', e.g. of the 'value' on *wealth*.

The indifference statement carries in germ a potential disjuncture which goes beyond the one usually claimed by Marxists – e.g. punctual overaccumulation and the contradiction between capital and wage-earning labour. Once having become an end in itself, interested

only in its own quantity, the ‘value’ is indifferent from its viewpoint whether its support is coal, wheat, edifices filled of asbestos, etc. If the social character of a production or a thing consists ultimately in its ability to transform itself in money, so its concrete content, its social and environmental consequences do not form a primary part in their social nature.

In this perspective, the case of the notion of utility has to be reconsidered. Brenkert (1975: 216) argues that Marx rejected the utilitarian thinking because he would have endorsed an ethic which “seeks to develop a system in which people live such that their actions and relations are meaningful and morally correct in themselves – not because of their relations to something else”. He relies on the following passage:

“The apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that in modern bourgeois society all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation... [T]hese relations are supposed not to have the meaning peculiar to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation attributed to them, the *relation of utility or utilization*. (Marx and Engels *The German Ideology*, 1975 vol. V: 409).

Melanson (1999: 406) stresses the fact that this position does not pay attention to the following passages:

“By dubbing certain things of the outside world (...) as “goods”, man will eventually come to compare these “goods” with one another, and according to the hierarchy of his needs will arrange them in a certain order” (Marx and Engels *Notes on Wagner’s Lehrbuch der politischen Oekonomie*, 1975 vol. 24: 543).

“[People] call them “goods” or something else which expresses the fact that they use these things in practice, that these things are useful to them, and they give the thing this character of utility as if it possessed it, although it would hardly occur to a sheep that one of its “useful” qualities is that it can be eaten by human beings” (*ibid*: 539).

As Melanson puts it, the connection between the quality of an object and our need or interest is the basis for the new quality it takes for us, that is to say its usefulness. Besides, there is no suggestion in the Marxian corpus of another meaning or value which exists independently on it: he described a historical and practical process.

Just afterwards the previous passage from *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels added:

“[t]his *paraphrasing* ceases to be meaningless and arbitrarily only when these relations have validity for the individual not on their own account, not as spontaneous activity, but rather as disguises, though by no means disguises of the category of utilisation, but of an *actual third aim and relation which is call the relation of utility*” (*ibid*: 409, last emphasis added by us).

At some point in this text, they wrote: “no one can do anything without at the same time doing it for the sake of one or other of his needs and for the sake of the organ of this need” (*ibid*: 255). The matter is not primarily descriptive but normative and alludes to the kind of reductionism that capitalist social relations imply according to them:

“the utility relation has a quite definite meaning, namely, that I derive benefit for myself by doing harm to someone else: in this case moreover the use that I derive from some relation is entirely extraneous to this relation, as we see above in connection with ability [the ability to write verse] that from each ability a product alien to it was demanded [the production of money], a relation determined by social relations – and this is precisely the relation of utility.

“[O]nly one relation is valid on its own account – the relation of exploitation (...). The material expression of this use is money which represents the value of all things, people and social relations”. (*ibid*: 409-410).

The objection is against *monism* that is involved by the domination of ‘capitalist need’ of production of money and the subordination to it of most human relationships. Marx’s

critique of Bentham could be understood this way. He said that Bentham “takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man” (Marx 1994a: 1117-1118). The capitalist needs – money and pleasures – being defined as the only kinds of needs, the conditions of capitalist society can be judged as “the most advantageous and generally useful” (Marx and Engels, *ibid*: 414).

Melanson (1999: 408-409) adds that “the reduction of the value of things to a single criterion for usefulness results in needs which are not reducible to money or ‘exchange value’ getting ignored in capitalist society”. The critique of utility theory by Marx and Engels does not require for us to value things, activities and relationships as actual goods, “regardless of their connection to our needs or interests”. It appears to be inspired “by a concern for the[i]r *plurality*”. In this respect, their views are compatible with an approach of human well-being founded on the idea of plurality of interests.

6. The nature of the value of ecological resources

The claimed axiological neutrality of the notions used by the neoclassical approach to capture environmental values takes in fact the form of a *value monism* through the anthropological hypotheses made about them.

As far as the notion of utility is concerned, its definition is given by Aldred (1997: 158) in economic theory. This definition has the “advantage of being generally accepted and thoroughly clear”: “a cardinal representation of an agent’s preferences”. Some additional considerations are needed. The tools are to be found primarily in the foundations of ‘welfare economics’ established by Pigou (1932).⁵ As a utilitarian economist, he adhered to the classical orthodoxy: “the elements of welfare are states of consciousness and, perhaps, their relations” (*ibid*: 10). He also shared the idea that economics needed something more quantifiable: the relation with money was chosen. This stance required two assumptions: (i) intensity of desire was accepted as a surrogate for felt satisfaction; (ii) income expenditure was accepted as a surrogate for intensity of desire. The result is that someone’s market choices are supposed to provide a measure of one’s economic welfare.

Pigou was aware that these assumptions were rough approximations of the truth: intensity of desire is only a crude indicator of degree of satisfaction, and the budgeting of income is an index of intensity of desire, at best in the special case of market goods. As Sumner (1996: 115) argues, “many of his successors (...) have been somewhat less circumspect”. In the theory of consumers, it has been quickly assumed that this residue of hedonism was superfluous. All core results of general equilibrium theory are derivable as long as the basic principles of consistency of market choices for generating utility functions are admitted. Utility is given a technical definition as the one maximized in consistent choices: the classical utilitarian identification between utility and welfare is abandoned.⁶

This result would have been explicitly conceded and the concept of welfare would have then been expelled altogether from positive economics. But that was not the case. In the environmental area, Pigou’s moves have been generalized to capture the whole nature of it.

⁵ For more details on this reasoning, see Sumner (1996 ch. 5).

⁶ “(...) the consumer’s market behavior is explained in terms of preferences, which are in turn defined only by behavior. The result can very easily be circular, and in many formulations undoubtedly is. Often nothing more is stated than the conclusion that people behave as they behave, a theorem which has no empirical implications, since it contains no hypotheses and is consistent with all conceivable behavior, while refutable by none” (Samuelson 1947: 117).

The result of it is the view that the contribution that a thing makes to the person's well-being is a function of the amount this person is willing to pay in order to get (or keep) it. Then, what does this contribution consist of? Carson et al's assertion that it is "utility whatever its source that matters for total [economic value]" can be completed by the following assertion: "the benefits of an environmental goods are the paths through which the changes in the level of satisfaction indicated by an agent's utility function occur" (Mitchell and Carson 1989: 60). The classical utilitarian equation of utility and welfare is re-established and therefore, rather implicitly in the discourse, the adherence to the core message of the classical monistic hedonism concerning welfare's nature: "anything that is valued must be, for that reason, a generator of pleasure" (Sen 1987a: 11).

If this is right, the building block of the 'economic valuation' approach then becomes permeable to the diverse and massive charges levelled against classical hedonism as an adequate account of the nature of welfare. The following argument of Scanlon is essential, even if it was developed against the 'desire theories':

"Desires theories should also be rejected as accounts of well-being appropriate to the first-person point of view". (...) the fact that a certain outcome would fulfil a person's desire would be a *basic reason* for that person to want that thing to come about. But desires do not provide basic reasons of this sort, at least in non-trivial cases. (...) this reason is either the sort described by a mental state view such as hedonism or a reason based on some other notion of substantive good (...) [which] may reflect my judgment that state of affairs is morally good, or that it is in my overall interest, or that it is a good thing of its kind (Scanlon 1993: 191-192).

The nature of welfare, from the person's point of view, cannot be matched neither to pleasure-producing, nor to desire-fulfilment approach, but must be referred to the person's goals and expectations. When talking about individual welfare, this is *reasons that fundamentally matter* and not any experiential discrete psychological attitude. Thus, the value monism takes a surreptitious form. The plurality of values at stake logically conflicts with the philosophical presuppositions of the neoclassical frame.

Pearce (2000: 51) acknowledges that "the issue of 'incommensurables' grew to be the single most controversial issue in valuation area, and it remains so today". Heal's questionings seem to be an avowal: "Does th[e] importance [of ecosystem services] translate into economic value? Are these services very valuable in an economic sense? (...) Economics is more concerned with *prices* than with *values* or *importance*: the distinction is sharp" (Heal, 2000: 24). This discomfort is produced by the arbitrary marginalist assimilation between price and utility – in the hedonist sense: it supports the idea that market is the only area from which wealth, all utilities, would originate and on which their importance (in terms of units of pleasure) would be exactly expressed.

In this context, it is not really surprising that some people who endorse monetary valuation justify its use on pragmatic grounds rather than purely theoretical grounds. Daily (1997: 1-5) affirms that "valuation involves resolving fundamental philosophical issues about the role of economic values in the policy process, and about the relation between economic value and human welfare." But she argues that "nothing could matter more" than attaching economic values to ecological services because "The way our decisions are made today is based almost entirely on economic values. (...) and we should put a price on it."

Isn't it a *political presupposition*? Do non-market components of what is called 'natural capital' have 'economic value' or not? The so-called pragmatic position does not really tackle this theoretical point: the urgency is practical and it amounts to resolving what Pearce calls the "zero-price problem" since "economic values" constitute the alpha and omega of our societies.

Let us try to answer. Such natural resources have no ‘*intrinsic economic value*’. Those which are not exploited by humans through the intervention of *socially validated human labour* have no ‘economic value’. To us they have a value which belongs to another register than economy. Apart from any use, if the choice is made of preserving, for instance, the balance of ecosystems, then it refers to *values* socially instituted that can be considered as incommensurable between them as well as irreducible to any monetary value.

The adjective ‘intrinsic’ is used to avoid any naturalising tendency: the scope of the ‘economic value’ in capitalist societies is a sociohistorical matter. Pearce (2002: 4) unwillingly provides a fundamental reasoning:

“(...) valuation is only one stage of a two-stage process. If we can demonstrate how important the environment is in terms of willingness to pay, then the next stage is to devise ways in which those valuations can be realized as cash flows. The issue is to design ‘capture’ mechanisms. A cost-benefit analysis does not concern itself with capture mechanisms – that is, means of converting non-monetary benefits to cash flows. If benefits exceed costs, that is sufficient cause to recommend conservation. But for a great many policy contexts, costs and benefits matter only if they are associated with real resource flows”.

On the theoretical ground, the arbitrary assimilation between exchange-value and use-value had the status of a theoretical premise. On the pragmatic ground it seems to attain the rank of a political project. Natural resources can become the support for the creation of ‘economic value’ for capital *if* the *institutional basis* emerges – private appropriation, intervention of human labour, means of social validation of this labour through monetary exchange. But there is no case in which this value will “capture” the benefits, diverse in nature, that human beings derived from these resources. The “cash flows” will have the human labour employed for their exploitation for substance. The relation of utility between them and humans, whatever the motives, is just a necessary condition for the creation of ‘economic value’.

The *political* stance according to which ‘utilities’ do not count if they are not counted in “economic terms” can be referred to as the ‘commodity fetishism’. In addition to this, its apparent complement – realisation of “cash flows” – seems also to confirm the basic Marxian analysis of the primacy of the ‘value’ over ‘use-value’, e.g. of the ‘value’ on wealth on all its forms.

The confidence in this analysis can be lost because of the huge importance placed on the notions of utility and interest. The point is that this critique made by environmental philosophers, from which the stance of ‘incommensurability of values’ is partly inspired, has signified the global rejection of *all* positions that resemble the neoclassical tenets – including a wholly subjective value system. As Prior (1998: 437) argues, “the idea of intrinsic values in nature – [separate from humans] – has certainly permeated much environmental thought and has both excited and validated a good deal of environmental activism”. But the essence of the matter concerning the human valuation makes this influence more or less awkward. In our view, he then asks the good questions: “If not economics then what? (...) General preference based evaluation? (...) Or the use of intrinsic values?” And his final discomfort gives the landmarks for an answer:

“This paper set out to diminish the role of economic valuation in judgments about environmental assets. But in a sense it has arrived at a much more fundamental problem, which is the possible lack of any way of making decisions which could, even in principle, arouse consensual social support. In part there is no doubt that this situation has arisen because of the wilful arrogance of many environmental economists. (...) one has to place an equally dogmatic though far less well argued ‘environmental’ stance on intrinsic values.”

It can be a ‘midway’ if we accept the idea that it is not welfarism as such and the notions of utility and interest that have to be rejected. Trainor (2006: 4) implicitly traces the next step:

“I view values as the result of a human valuing process that occurs in cultural, social and historical contexts. I do not analyse values as objective properties that inhere in resources or nature. Thus, how different individuals and groups come to hold their values, how those values are expressed, and the factors that influence a change in values, e.g. the origin, expression, and evolution of values, are significant for policy making.”

At this point, the understanding and the conceptualization of the human actor, his motivations and well-being become central for the ‘rebel’ approach.

7. From a political economy of wealth to the contemporary approaches of well-being

It is argued in the ‘rebel’ approach that, given the limitations of the ‘economic’ assumptions about the valuing agent, policy needs to be informed by philosophical, psychological and sociological understanding which offers a richer model of the agent (O’Neill and Spash 2000). Regarding this aspect, this approach shares the ideas of one other growing literature in EE which aims at discussing the understanding of the human actor (see Becker 2006).

Their core feature is a *dualist* model of the agent: a clear separation is made between the sphere of human self-interest and various dimensions reflecting ‘disinterested motivations’. Therefore the subject area of EE requires different underlying assumptions about the human being for capturing its other dimensions beyond his self-relation. Ethical considerations like “striving for political justice” (Faber et al. 2002: 328), or “sympathy with other beings, human and non-human” (Becker 2006: 20) are described as essential driving forces of actions and judgments of human beings. The concepts of “homo politicus” (Faber et al. 2002), of “Political Economic Person” (Söderbaum 1999) and of “homo ecologicus” (Becker 2006) are proposed to catch these dimensions.

This quest is close to that led by Sen regarding human well-being.

“We can see the person, in terms of agency, recognizing and respecting her ability to form goals, commitments, values, etc. and we can also see the person in terms of well-being. The dichotomy is lost in a model of exclusively self-interested motivation in which person’s agency must be entirely geared to his own well-being”. (Sen 1987b).

This picture is explicitly used by Aldred (1997: 159) in the environmental field. He first explains that adherence to moral and other commitments can be a purpose. He then asserts that “this possibility of support for the environment being essentially self-interested, improving the agent’s welfare by giving them a ‘warm glow’ or preventing feelings of guilt, is not inevitable”. Relying on Sen’s concept of ‘commitment’, he decouples “the two notions of value which are commonly linked – welfare and utility”. The defining characteristic of “ethical value” regarding environment becomes “utility in the absence of welfare”.

I would like to start with a question introducing our view on that issue. What sort of goals can be important for someone if those very goals do not echo values which are central for the wellness of one’s being? We think that the dualist model of the human actor constitutes a kind of nominal solution, the analytical properties of which are thin. Again, the axiological neutrality claimed by neoclassical economists regarding the interest notion is highly disputable. This characteristic has nevertheless motivated the treatment under its lens

of a large amount of human or social phenomenon. In the environmental area, Mitchell and Carson (1989: 66) put it as follows:

“[M]ost important, it is erroneous to assume that making choices on the basis of ethical beliefs necessarily involves self-sacrifice; in fact, those who make choices of this kind obtain utility from satisfying internalised social norms... Far from being counter-preferential, in properly conducted contingent valuation studies, choices based on these preferences are motivated by self-interested and egoistic considerations”.

Stigmatising ethically utility and interest because of rooting all actions to a personal end makes the critique somewhat inoperative. The point at issue is to define what kind of end we are talking about. These are the underlying anthropological hypotheses made about them that are suspicious: (1) all actions are conscious and fully deliberate; (2) the cultural and social contexts do not play a role regarding them (3) they are made under the scope of the methodical pursuit of an individual advantage – the arithmetic of pleasures and pains. But firstly it can at least be argued that they are categories historically dated and socially construed and, secondly, that they form just *one kind* of interest.

The task is thus to justify the association between on the one hand the “agency goals” and on the other hand his interests in the extent where these goals are connected to values which are constituent of his being and its wellness. Giri (2000: 1006) is the most explicit of all:

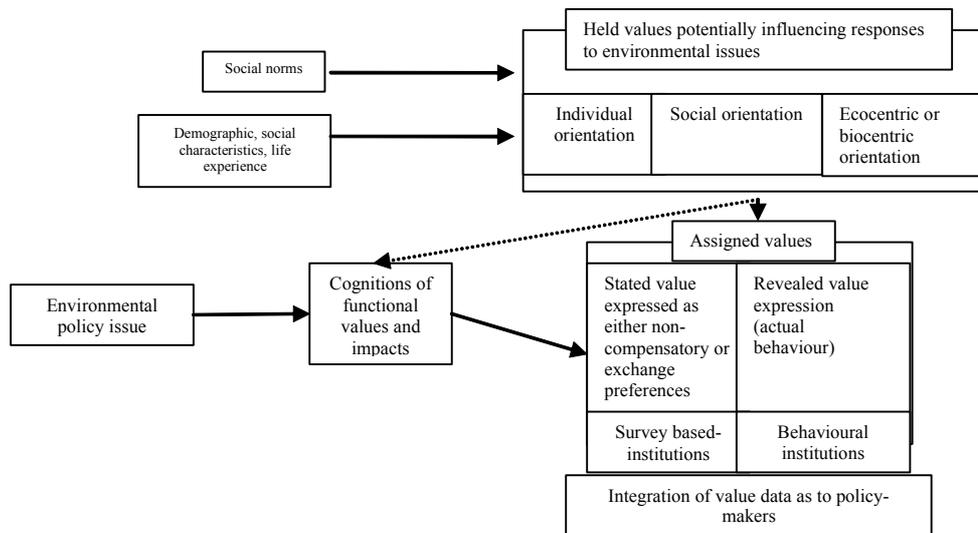
“(...) in order to realize [HWB], there is a need to go beyond this dualism between self-regarding activity and other-regarding activity, beyond egoism and altruism. Other-regarding activity is not solely self-sacrificial, it is also self-nurturing. But Sen looks at other-regarding activity primarily through the prism of self-sacrifice”.

Accordingly, the values underlying environmental judgments are socially instituted. In this regard, Vatn (2000) is right when he assumes that ethical values related to environmental choices are fundamentally social. But these are symmetrically inscribed in human beings and underlie the constitutions of some of their interests (see Hitlin and Piliavin 2004). So the human valuing process occurs in a social, cultural and historical context and any individualistic approach regarding them has to be integrated into a wider perspective of social constructivism which allows a kind of sociologisation of subjectivity.

4. Conclusion remarks

The Lockwood’s synthesis will then serve as a basis for resuming my approach. Its aim is to develop a model that integrates insights from philosophy, psychology and economics. It is argued that environmental philosophers have examined the notion that there is an intrinsic value in nature; that economists have attempted to define and measure the “nonmarket economic values” associated with natural areas; and that psychologists have examined individuals’ value orientations toward the environment and have assessed the extent to which “people believe in an intrinsic value in nature” (Lockwood 1999: 381-383).

FIGURE 2. The Lockwood's synthesis



We will conclude by some remarks. First, the content and the role of the so-called ‘intrinsic value’ of nature is not clear. If it refers to the “ecocentric or biocentric orientation”, then this appellation is a mistake because that orientation is grounded in human held values. Lockwood (1999: 393) then reminds us of the fact that “(...) social scientists (...) have raised more fundamental issues, arguing that values which are the subject of a typical CV survey are not necessarily economic in nature”. He continues as follows: “To resolve this issue, an understanding of the various ways in which individuals express values is required”. But this is the type of institutions invoked in the process of expressing values which is controversial because it influences both the values that come forward and the conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of them (Vatn 2005: 210). Thus, using real or imitated markets and CBA will make respondents focus on monetizing and trade-offs.

What can be the driving forces of a real transdisciplinary dialogue are the following propositions: (1) non-market environmental entities have no ‘intrinsic economic value’, as long as the institutional basis for the *production* of ‘economic value’ is not created. For us, they have a value which belongs to another register than economy; (2) what is clumsily called the “values expressed” corresponds to the internalised person’s values which “are presumed to encapsulate the aspirations of individuals and societies” (Braithwaite and Scott 1991: 661); (3) there is no reason to assume that any single unit of measurement can capture these values. The stance of monetary commensurability is valid only if the underlying philosophical and political presuppositions are accepted.

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