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## **Comment on John Foster**

*Abstract:* Modern environmental thought is characterized by a paradox. The value of environmental goods seems to transcend all purely human values. At the same time environmental goods have to be placed within an overall ranking if there is to be rational environmental policy. It is argued that J. Foster's concept of value-judgement cannot solve this paradox.

J. Foster's paper documents a deep ambivalence characteristic of environmentalism, an ambivalence which concerns economic thinking in the context of environmental issues. Let me briefly sum up how Foster expresses the environmentalist's predicament concerning economic thinking. The key concept of this mode of thinking is the idea of a meliorist ranking of options. On the one hand Foster clearly acknowledges that a meliorist ranking of the available options is necessary if we want to plan and act rationally; this is also true especially if we want to preserve the environment effectively. "If this practice of ranking – corresponding to what I have called economic thinking based on weak commensurability – is to be rejected, or even significantly compromised, any prospect of a rational environmental policy for a modern society looks, suddenly, terribly remote." For Foster rational decision is only possible if there is a complete ordering of the options, that is if incommensurable values are ruled out. On the other hand: there is an environmental case against value commensurability. Environmentalism "generates a presumption against the availability of any well-grounded 'ordering' at all, from our species-limited perspective" (138). Commensurability seems to imply that man transgresses his limits and pretends to be the measure of all things. This is what Foster calls "hubris".

Put in this way the case against commensurability sounds rather abstract. Perhaps we could put the environmentalist's difficulties with commensurability more bluntly. He fears that if he plays the game he will lose it; that is: if he accepts ranking, he will get in the end the wrong priorities, at least from his point of view. One radical answer to this danger would be to reject commensurability altogether. But Foster does not recommend that for the reasons mentioned above. So he ends up with the problem how to preserve commensurability on the one hand and counterbalance "hubris" on the other. For Foster "value-judgement" properly conceived provides the solution. According to Foster there are "three central or inherent

conditions on value-judgement": originality, disinterestedness, and attentiveness to the object.

First concerning originality: as I understand it, this condition contains a rejection of an objective theory of value and a commitment to subjective value-theory. Value is not out there, Foster says, and judgement about value does not mean to form a more or less true belief about value as an objective property of things. He even cites the well-known argument for a subjective theory of value: objective properties of things cannot guide us to action; if value-judgements are meant to guide us, they cannot be about objective properties. If one has environmentalist reservations about economic thinking Foster's embracement of a subjective theory of value will surely not calm one down, on the contrary. So why does he favour a subjective theory? The answer is: for the sake of commensurability.

As I understand Foster he means that an objective theory of value needs strong commensurability, that is commensurability based on a common measure. And since strong commensurability is not to be had, objective theories are untenable. I am not sure whether this is true. I would rather put it the other way around: subjective value-theory has no serious problem with commensurability. It takes the value-judgements of people at face value, perhaps not all judgements – if a structured view in Broome's sense is taken – but at least those which are finally fed into the structure. What people say about the relative value of things is all that is to be said – there is nothing behind it, according to which their ranking has to be true. You can also say with Foster: they create the ranking. That is the reason why subjective value theory can handle the whole problem of weak commensurability in the spirit of the saying: "the proof of the pudding is in the eating". People rank options – therefore options are comparable or commensurable in the weak sense.

The only threat to commensurability within the subjectivist framework lies perhaps in the fact that people may not be able to rank or may refuse to rank – if it really is a fact. Foster is optimistic about this problem: faced with concrete situations people will rank and will be able to rank. If this is the way how a subjective theory saves commensurability this seems to be – as Foster himself remarks – even more irretrievably hubristic: man *is* the measure of all things.

The second condition pertaining to value-judgement – *disinterestedness* is evidently meant to counterbalance hubris. At least it seems to be the right candidate to appease the environmentalist. If purely human values are ruled out right at the beginning, the environmentalist need not fear ending up with the wrong priorities.

In my opinion the thesis that value-judgement is subjectively created but nevertheless disinterested is a very strong one and constitutes a central point of Foster's paper. All current theories of value tie value-judgement closely to well-being, perhaps not only exclusively human well-being, but *also* human well-being. In view of this one would expect Foster to try hard to convince us of the possibility of value without human interest. Instead he plays a trick on us: interested value-judgement would not be a judgement at all. It would not be 'real' value-judgement, but value-judgement in inverted commas.

This move of course begs the question. Or rather it is a repetition of the original thesis that value-judgement has to be disinterested. Foster seems to see the problem when he observes that there are "statements which have the form and some of the functions of value-judgements, but which fail the condition of disinterestedness" – he calls them preferences (144). Of course he is free to make this distinction. What is it good for? What Foster intends to show is that the weighing of environmental goods is essentially disinterested. This does not follow from the distinction as such. What we need is an argument which tells us why only value-judgements, which are by definition disinterested, but not self-interested preferences, should count in weighing environmental goods.

There is a further difficulty: How are we to make value-judgments if we are not allowed to think of our own interests? Is here perhaps Foster's third condition of attentiveness of help? I think not. Attentiveness in the sense of looking carefully at the properties or aspects of an option does not exclude interestedness. On the contrary: if I want to find out how an option bears on my interests I have to be fully attentive to all aspects and properties of the option. Attentiveness seems to be no special ally of disinterestedness.

To conclude: Fosters concept of value-judgement is meant to solve the problem how one can square the cycle and hold a subjective theory of value without reference to human interests and preferences. In my opinion it cannot solve the problem: it has too many edges.