

**A Dangerous Liaison?  
Libertarianism, Sustainability, and Ecological Citizenship.**

Manuel Arias-Maldonado  
University of Málaga, Spain  
marias@uma.es

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*Abstract:* Since its very inception, environmentalism has always attempted to constrain human activities, lest ecological boundaries are trespassed and both human societies and the non-human world are endangered. The rise of climate change has but reinforced the notion that sustainability can only be achieved through restraint and even de-growth. In this context, libertarianism seems to be the most alien political ideology to the green endeavor, focused as it traditionally is in enlarging individual freedom and reducing the ability of the state to arrange the social order. However, this paper claims that such is not necessarily the case, since a profitable relation can be established between libertarianism, sustainability and ecological citizenship. To be more precise, if sustainability is the main goal of environmentalism and ecological citizenship a very relevant tool for building it up, then libertarianism can help us normatively to devise a concept of the former that is put into practice by the latter, within the framework provided by a pluralistic liberal democracy *and* a pluralistic liberal society – which is not exactly the same thing. Thus libertarianism may make an unexpected contribution to the reflection upon sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction.

Although Western societies are said to be liberal ones, that is rather a simplification. Naturally, they are indeed liberal societies, but also societies wherein other political ideologies have left their mark. It could be said that they are societies whose political organization is liberal, whose states incorporate a strong component of welfarism, as well as the operation of relatively free markets, while the nation remains as the main unit of political legitimation. When discussing far-reaching social goals, this description is to be taken into account.

Of course, many caveats may apply. Multiculturalism, globalization, and digital technologies are disruptive forces undermining each of those foundations, pushing liberal societies in a direction that is yet unclear. At the same time, the label itself is misleading, since liberal societies are far from homogeneous: history and culture make for sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden differences in the way in which political institutions, welfare organization, markets design and national legitimation play out. Yet, for all their dissimilarities, they share enough features to be rightly identified as the contemporary liberal societies that constitute the Western standard of governance and societal organization.

The question that concerns us here is the following: how to promote sustainability in liberal societies without undermining their foundations? That is, how to advance towards a society that remains liberal but is also sustainable?

This is not to claim that environmentalism is unable to achieve more transformative goals, namely, the overcome of liberalism in order to build up some sort of post-liberal sustainable society. Yet normative and practical reasons suggest that liberal societies should not be overcome. On the one hand, they institutionalize and guarantee valuable normative principles – among them the fostering of a public conversation about the good life and the good society. On the other hand, they tend to work, that is, their socio-economic outcomes are better than the one provided by non-liberal regimes. A cautious approach to social change thus suggest that the latter should be promoted within the liberal framework. Radical greens would surely disagree with this premise, having good reasons to do so. Still, that premise stands as the departure point of this paper, which tries to be realistic about the social frame in which sustainability has to be fostered – a more deep social change being just a possibility that cannot be discarded.

In this context, I would like to focus on ecological citizenship as a means to advance towards sustainability in a liberal society, suggesting that an unexpected yet useful link can be set up between a liberal-friendly environmentalism that defends an open conception of sustainability, ecological citizenship, and a particular aspect of libertarianism. More specifically, I propose an analogy between Robert Nozick's 'framework for utopia' and a 'framework for sustainability' that dwells on ecological citizenship as a way to engage individuals in the quest for –and the definition of– a sustainable society.

A metodological caution seems advisable. It will be apparent throughout the paper that I am not adhering to a comprehensive notion of political ideologies or theories, that is, one that requires taking or leaving them as wholes or packages whose particular ideas would be meaningless outside of them. Actually, it is not the case. Ideologies and theories are intellectual constructions that may include good *and* bad ideas and are hence amenable to a certain degree of fragmentation and thus adoption. Theories may be seen as tool boxes, some of which are useful for solving certain problems in combination with tools coming from some other source – while some are useless when separated from the body of thought they belong to.

Let us take the marxist notion of class struggle, the liberal idea that powers must be separated, the socialist redistributive purpose. They all make a given sense and occupy a certain place within the corresponding ideologies, yet they can also make sense and occupy a certain place outside them: class struggle may explain history or some episodes in history without pointing to a communist society, the separation of powers can accommodate societies wherein the state is nor morally neutral or market freedom restricted, socialist redistribution does not have to fit into a centralized economy. As I pointed out earlier, actual

societies are very much so. They have come to combine different features from a variety of political and moral traditions.

To be sure, ideological purity is an amusing thing, theoretical consistency an academic virtue – but there is no reason to refuse the plausibility or usefulness of some intersections of ideas. To a certain extent, that is what the conversation of political philosophers and theorists is about. Such is the approach I am taking in this paper: an heterogeneous, mestizo one. Thus I depart from an environmentalist position that is liberal-friendly and that in turn combines a certain view of ecological citizenship with a libertarian understanding of freedom in the public and private spheres.

## **2. Sustainability within liberalism.**

The disagreement between political liberalism and environmentalism revolves largely around the relationship between the liberal principle of neutrality and the green conception of the good. That is not surprising, since a conflict is bound to arise whenever procedural framework and consequentialist ethics meet. It goes without saying that the conflict concerns sustainability too. Searching for sustainability is, after all, assuming publicly a substantive conception of the good – the green one. Or is it not?

Such is the question I would like to answer first. It could be argued that the more openly sustainability is defined, the more easily a solution to this problem may be found. If, on the contrary, a strong version of sustainability is promoted as *the* public version of the principle, the convergence is more unlikely.

But it might as well be the case that it is liberalism that must adopt a moral view of nature if it is to become sustainable. The reason is simple: liberalism is founded on an anthropocentric epistemological framework that hinders the adoption of greener – i.e. more ecocentric – attitudes on the part of the citizens. Robyn Eckersley suggests that “the liberal state reinforces a particular kind of self, with particular kinds of dispositions” (Eckersley 2004: 105). In this case, such disposition is no other than seeing nature as a resource for the satisfaction of human needs, either material or aesthetic. That is why environmentalism wishes for a different context, where better – greener – citizens can emerge, leading to tighter environmental standards and better – greener – policies: a virtuous circle.

Yet these goals require not only procedural, but also substantive means. Whereas liberalism promotes axiological neutrality and proceeds to aggregate autonomous individual preferences, environmentalism demands some kind of state intervention, on account of the need to protect a common good, i.e. the environment. Thus it defends a particular conception of the good. This certainly goes to show that it is not easy to solve – namely, that maybe liberalism and environmentalism are irreconcilable.

Sagoff (1988) sees two basic distinctions in liberalism, namely, a separation between the state and the civil society on the one hand, and a separation between the basic institutional structure and the particular social policies that result from it on the other. Liberals claim that the institutional structure of society must be neutral regarding the different conceptions of the good held by their citizens. Thus liberal theory, in itself a comprehensive moral view, applies on that level, but not on the level of the resulting social policies. The institutional structure regulates the debate and negotiation *between* different conceptions of the good. Henceforth, environmentalists can and must be liberals. As liberal institutions do not anticipate any particular political outcome, environmentalism can fight to produce them in the layer corresponding to social policies, where the rule of neutrality does *not* apply. Therefore, Sagoff concludes, liberal democracy turns out to be the most favourable form of democracy for achieving green goals.

From this point of view, the environmentalist can promote green policies, but should not try to impose a general moralisation of socio-natural relations. Following Joseph Raz (1988), a *neutrality of justification* would demand that political procedures and actions are not justified as the product of a given conception of the good, whereas a *neutrality of outcome* would prevent that the political process results in the promotion of a conception of the good over others.

But environmentalism *is* a consequentialist conception of the good, one that has traditionally aspired to a thorough transformation of society. Such purpose is embodied in the strong versions of sustainability. Some of them even ban travelling! Green goals thus seem to go beyond the liberal regulative framework, which in turn means that the mere competition for social policies might not be enough for them. Is this not an insurmountable obstacle for any agreement between environmentalism and liberalism? Against Sagoff, then, greens *could not* be liberals. Some kind of green reformism might have a place within the liberal framework, but not the robust conception of the good that environmentalism actually is (Dobson 1998: 12). Indeed. But that does not refute political liberalism as much as it shows the need to renew environmentalism, in order to make their convergence feasible. Admittedly, classical environmentalism would have it the other way around, claiming that it is liberalism that needs to be amended. But let us see.

The neutrality principle stems from the liberal conviction that there is not any true conception of the good. In other words, liberalism does not support any epistemological utopia, believes not in a closure of knowledge (see Kolakowski 2006). As it is impossible to choose any single conception of the good among many, a neutral political structure is set up that guarantees those basic freedoms that permit individuals the satisfaction of their preferences, derived in turn from their own conceptions of the good, in the private sphere. The state cannot influence individual preferences: “People’s needs – for company, children, food, technology, travel and trinkets – are private affairs; control, if possible at all, is impermissible” (Wissenburg 1998: 67). However, environmentalists question the very separation between the public and the private upon which liberal neutrality rests. Taking care of the environment would require the possibility of *interfering* with private choices (see Smith 1999: 52). Individual autonomy can easily clash with the requirements of sustainability. And vice versa: sustainability can be a threat to liberal neutrality, if it demands a restriction of liberties incompatible with the liberal order.

This problem has been exposed by recurring to the somewhat simplistic distinction between citizens and consumers. If environmental goods are public goods, they cannot be left to the dynamics of the market – they must be protected. There is supposed to be a difference in the formation of individual preferences towards public and private goods. By deciding about public goods, we must weigh our interests as much as the others’, taking into consideration our ethical principles and the kind of society we prefer (Jacobs 1997: 219, Elster 1997). As consumers, we just think of our own benefit; as citizens, our decision is grounded on the public interests of the community. That is how things *should* be. And such is the implicit premise in the green view of the good:

“A green life is not primarily a better life (although it might be that too). The value of living responsibly with regard to other beings and things resides not so much in what it allows the individual to be as in what it allows the world and our society to be” (Beckman 2001: 184).

Sustainable attitudes would not reflect as much preferences as ideas of the good. Therefore, environmental policies should not be based on the preferences as expressed in the market, but on the values that emerge from the debates about the public good (De-Shalit, 2000: 90). Again: so should it be!

But environmentalism finds yet another problem in the liberal society, namely, that environmental goods are not *perceived* as public goods. And such perception is taken as a necessary condition for the formation of community-oriented attitudes. If values and preferences do not reflect the particular individual, then they reflect the society in which that individual lives, so that the society in which we live matters enormously. This leads to the well-known green argument, rooted in Marxian epistemology, according to which the liberal-capitalist context hinders the emergence of green values – or deep green values, to be precise. Furthermore, that implicit bias would be worsened by the liberal indifference towards the preference formation process. The green retort is obvious: neutrality ends up reinforcing the *private* perception and treatment of *public* goods, thus becoming a great obstacle to the achievement of sustainability. That is why environmentalists criticise the social and communicative context in which individual and social preferences are formed and enacted (Eckersley 2004: 96). Moreover: “the quest for sustainable modes of being represents a challenge to liberal democratic notions of how the collective good is determined” (Davidson 2000: 34). If we want the individual to behave himself more as a citizen than as a consumer, it seems, we have to *educate* him.

Nevertheless, it appears to me that the distinction between the roles of citizen and consumer is a bit too lazy. Is it that clear that we, as citizens, are committed to the public interest and to our conception of the good, whereas we, as consumers, remain exclusively attached to our private satisfaction, mysteriously rendered as something separated from our conception of the good? Such categorical separation can actually happen only in an *ideal* individual – an individual that, by definition, does not exist. There is no such thing as consumption devoid of social and symbolic elements beyond the simple cost-benefit analysis. Of course, *taste* is a different matter, but the lack or the abundance of taste is ultimately dependant on education or refinement. Moreover, this is a trait that will be evident in *any* realm of an individual's life, not only in their environmental attitudes. To believe that our subjectivity possesses closed compartments is self-deluding. There is no public reasoning without private insights, and vice versa.

Moreover, if we accept the suggestion that a given social context is *decisive* for determining individual preferences, the very value pluralism upon which the neutrality principle rests would be dramatically undermined – because there would never be such thing as an individual *choice* anymore. Yet which preferences and values are chosen, which are exogenously determined? If the liberal-capitalist context induces a particular type of them, is the same not bound to occur in any other social context? Could it not even be the case that some other social contexts (like a strong sustainable society, to name but one) would restrict the range of conceivable preferences more tightly? After all, it is paternalistic to suggest that citizens are not aware of their own preferences, especially since there would be no objection at all were such preferences to coincide with those that their critics hold. As Mathew Humphrey has pointed out, “Because *I* completely fail to comprehend the notion of a life devoted to conspicuous consumption, does this give me a reason to somehow rule it out of court as an acceptable life-plan?” (Humphrey 2002: 59). A preference for nature's protection and enjoyment should then be deemed “as a respectable personal ideal – but nothing more than that” (Birnbacher 2006: 131). However, the same does not apply to sustainability writ large, since the latter is, ultimately, a precondition for the development of *any* life-plan.

Henceforth, in the absence of a perfectly neutral social context, political liberalism aims to solve the conflict between different conceptions of the good by setting up the principle of neutrality in the institutional level. Yet that does not mean complete political neutrality on the part of the state: democratic societies possess substantive rules that are the outcome of a gradual assimilation of socio-political debates on the good life. There is a safety net for the poor and unemployed; there are rights for the protection of minorities; laws exist against animal abuse; and so on. As Rawls (1993) claims, there is a moral dimension in the political community. And the interventionist liberalism that is dominant in the *practice* of Western democracies articulates that dimension. Liberal political institutions are hence not impassive before social change. They recognize many exceptions to the principle of neutrality. A democratic society is thus an ethical-political structure, whose ongoing debates produce changes in the institutional level. But these changes are not exclusively decided within institutions, nor are necessarily translated into legislation. Sustainability might just be one of those exceptions, as long as it is understood normatively – as an open sustainability.

### 3. Sustainability and the rethoric of the good life.

The green critique, certainly shared with other political doctrines that aim for a substantive transformation of society, exposes the flaws implicit in the very idea of neutrality. They can be summarised by saying that proposing neutrality is not the same as achieving it, since liberalism is in itself a comprehensive moral view that does not permit the full realisation of any other rival moral view. It is a sort of *aporia*: liberalism may be said to be a conception of the good grounded on the impossibility to choose between different conceptions of the good. Yet it is in itself biased in favour of these values – liberal values – which are what makes the discussion on the good life possible at all.

A question follows. To what extent does this rule restrict the realisation of those conceptions of the good that, like environmentalism itself, more strongly disagree with the current social order? Marcel Wissenburg (1998: 61) has pointed out that liberalism does not seem authorised to prescribe a single sustainable society, since that would mean choosing a conception of the good among many. Instead, it can only conceive the

sustainable society as a range of possible and permissible worlds, not as a sacred goal of human existence. This is in turn connected to liberal scepticism. If there is no definite truth, the dispute between different conceptions of the good cannot conclude with the full realisation of any of them. As a consequence, the outcome of the debate seems somewhat irrelevant. Alasdair MacIntyre has thus described the liberal order as

“one in which each standpoint may make its claims but can do no more within the framework of the public order, since no overall theory of the human good is to be regarded as justified. Hence at this level debate is necessarily barren; rival appeals to accounts of the human good or of justice necessarily assume a *rethorical form* such that it is as assertion and counterassertion, rather than as argument and counterargument, that rival standpoints confront one another” (MacIntyre 1988: 343).

My emphasis. Substantive conclusions would then lack any real importance; the debate would be condemned to circularity. Moreover, it is this atmospheric impartiality that would prevent people from thinking in terms of the ‘good life’ (see Dobson 1998: 207). It is paradoxical, though, that the same foundations of liberalism that have allowed environmentalism to thrive would now be signalling its limits. Henecofrth, although liberalism’s anti-chauvinism has made the promotion of green attitudes and values possible, it also sets a limit for the public realisation of the green conception of the good (see De-Shalit 2000: 66). That is why environmentalists denounce that the ensuing liberal neutralisation – via assimilation – of the green programme represents but the victory of environmental pragmatism over ecocentric theory (Eckersley 2002: 49). But is the liberal rethoric really a trap?

Liberalism deems acceptable those partial outcomes of the public debate that do not threaten an institutional structure grounded on the premise of impartiality towards the different comprehensive conceptions of the good. The reason is that the full adoption of any of them would *prevent* the continuation of such debate. It can be put this way: the neutrality principle creates the conditions for the public debate, but at the same time it postpones indefinitely the chance that totalising outcomes can be ever derived from it. The consequences for the green agenda would be harmful:

“The paradox, then, is that, while on the one hand liberalism allows and encourages discussion on environmental issues, on the other it cannot permit the outcome of the discussion namely the implementation, maintenance, and justification of environmental policies. Thus, it precludes constructive public action that is meant to protect the environment” (De-Shalit 2000: 65).

Yet is that so? Although they are always bound to be considered unsatisfactory by greens, there is no shortage of environmental policies within liberal democracies. However, if that were the case, is it necessary to reformulate the principle of neutrality, so that the latter allows for adopting and implementing substantive conclusions, provided that such adoption does *not* suppress the chances of other conceptions of the good to be adopted as well? Such is Seyla Benhabib’s suggestion: the adoption of a constrained neutrality consisting of rules which are so abstract that different ways of life and conceptions of the good are allowed to flourish, while at the same time none of them can behave in an authoritarian manner regarding others (see Benhabib 1992: 16, Downing and Thigpen 1989). It is not clear, though, how this could work.

It is not, because conflicts between rival conceptions of the good are more common than agreements. If a conception of the good demands social substantive changes – as a strong sustainability would do – the conflict is unavoidable and actually irresolvable. By admitting exceptions to the general rule of neutrality, liberalism already guarantees a balance between fairness and goodness. Political debates and negotiations translate to an institutional level the larger debate that takes place in society. They do so in a twofold way: as an *argumentative* debate in the realm of communication and as a *performative* debate in the realm of action. The fact that green values have flourished in the last decades proves that liberal democracy does not prevent socio-cultural dynamism.

On the other hand, green commentators have demanded a particular type of liberalism for the dialogue with environmentalism to bear fruits at all, i. e. a liberalism rooted in the social-pragmatic tradition (see Musschenga 1994, Wissenburg 1998: 74, De Geus 1999: 35, De-Shalit 2000: 92, Stephens 2001: 2, Barry

2001: 79). In other words, a pragmatic liberalism that sees democracy as something more than a tool for *protecting* citizens – namely, as an ethical community also devoted to foster the moral and personal *development* of those citizens. Instead of a purely formal liberalism that sets up a sharp distinction between politics and society, a substantive liberalism would permit state interference whenever it is justified (Levine 1981: 23). Public debate should then go beyond mere rethoric, although the following interference cannot unjustifiably constrain the individual search for the good life. Such is, in sum, the view of liberalism that environmentalists have got used to invoke: a liberalism that fosters public debate on the good life and is therefore ready to make substantive institutional changes.

However, is this an interpretation of the *desirable* liberalism, or an approximate description of the way in which liberal democracies *actually* operate? Because it seems to me that for all our theoretical assumptions, the principle of neutrality does not hinder a substantive political debate, nor therefore are there insurmountable obstacles for achieving sustainability. Society changes, an imperfect debate goes on, sustainability is discussed. This may be a slow, disappointing process – but it is the slow, disappointing pace of democracy. Yet, on the other hand, environmentalists may also be frustrated because there seems to be no place for their preferred, strong versions of sustainability within liberal society. This is true. Some versions of sustainability are not compatible with the principle of neutrality and are even openly illiberal. And between liberal neutrality and radical sustainability – between the fair and the good – the former must prevail.

#### 4. Open sustainability and green liberalism.

Nevertheless, not even an interpretation of neutrality that allows a certain degree of public interventionism *guarantees* that green values will prevail as a result of the debate on the good life. Should sustainability then be incorporated to the core of basic democratic values, on the grounds that it is a precondition for liberal society itself?

So has been suggested. The rationale for this option is clear: liberal democracy can make sure that the socionatural relationship is sustainable without contradicting its commitment to neutrality. After all, some interests are already protected within liberal democracies, so that sustainability could also be justified as a necessary contribution to the preservation of the *liberal* conditions of society. In this vein, nature's protection would be justified as a protection of neutrality itself, insofar as the right to enjoy a sufficiently 'natural' environment should be protected (Humphrey 2002: 189, Birnbacher 2006: 190). This caution is valid not only for present, but also for people in the future, since we cannot know whether they will wish to enjoy nature or not (Ott and Döring 2004: 104). The preservation of a non-anthropogenic nature would then serve the purpose of protecting the *possibility* of a green way of life and hence the diversity of the moral landscape. It is relatively unimportant here whether nature is protected on ecocentric or anthropocentric grounds: a sound environment would have a *derivative* value for liberal society (Vincent 1998: 447-448). From this standpoint, liberalism should not neglect green demands, lest it betrays its own foundations. A liberalism without sustainability would then not be conceivable. Yet a sustainability without liberalism *is* conceivable. And that, precisely, is the problem.

Once again, the point is that nature's protection is not the same as sustainability. The former can embody different degrees of the latter. So which one is exactly going to make its way into the core principles of liberal society? The implications differ. It should be remembered that the justification for greening liberal democracy is directly connected to the *form* that sustainability is to adopt. And different sustainable societies carry different consequences for the shape of society and the lives of its citizens. Or, to put it differently: we may well say that nature's protection or sustainability should be incorporated into liberal democracy's core values, but which degree of protection and which version of sustainability?

After all, sustainability *as such* does not require a special justification anymore. Almost everybody is inclined to agree on the need to re-organise the socionatural relationship in a durable way, a conviction that the threat of climate change and the coming of the Anthropocene has reinforced. Of course, particular justifications can be provided, i.e. reasons why liberalism should make room for sustainability in its normative warehouse.

For instance, Derek Bell (2005: 183-185) has suggested that the protection of both basic needs and reasonable pluralism demand a certain degree of environmental protection, whereas Simon Hailwood (2005: 199) claims that contemporary political reasonableness involves an environmental commitment that does not undermine liberal neutrality. In other words, liberalism must be sustainable and a minimum degree of naturalness should be protected. Yet the precise *content* of sustainability remains undetermined. In this context, it is a greater protection of nature, or even more clearly, it is the implementation of strong versions of sustainability that demand a greater justification. In fact, each particular version of sustainability should be justified before the equal pretension of rival versions.

Henceforth, the solution lies in adding a normatively conceived principle of sustainability to the institutional structure of liberal democracy – that is, a sustainability understood as an open principle towards which society is oriented, without predetermining its particular content. As it happens, a closed interpretation of sustainability is not compatible with the open and procedural character of liberal democracy, since it violates the neutrality principle and would prevent the democratic emergence of the sustainable society. In turn, this means that strong versions of sustainability can be defended *within* liberal democracy, but cannot be fully adopted if that means the closing of that very debate. Because whereas a radical environmentalist can make his voice heard inside liberalism, nobody's reasons would be heard in a radical sustainable society.

On the contrary, if the intrinsically normative character of sustainability is recognised, sustainability and democracy can be seen as mutually reinforcing principles. Thus liberal democracy provides the neutral framework wherein the debate about the shape of sustainability takes place. Thus sustainability becomes a core democratic value that is implicit in the foundations of liberal society. And the former's normative quality does not determine *ex ante* the shape of the (liberal) sustainable society, rather it makes this shape dependent on the conclusions – always provisional – that derive from such debate. Society is oriented to sustainability, but not forced to adopt a particular version of it.

Admittedly, the idea that the liberal state *will* eventually adopt sustainability as a general goal may seem delusionary, since there is no guarantee that this will actually happen. In fact, the current degree of consensus on the need to pursue sustainable policies cannot be exaggerated, especially in the aftermath of a financial crisis that has shown how the good old materialist values still trump the brand new postmaterialist ones if growth slows and unemployment rises. However, environmental concerns are growing in every realm and it seems a matter of time that this general trend becomes more or less formally entrenched in the constitutional *ethos* of liberal democracies. A general mandate towards sustainability would meet resistance, of course, because it would impose some minimal ecological standards that would operate as the framework within which particular versions of sustainability would contend. But to some extent, they already apply.

### **5. Sustainability and libertarianism: the oddest couple?**

An improbable parallel can be drawn at this point. Remember Robert Nozick's framework for utopia? I suggest that it can help us to devise the kind of liberal sustainable society that we are trying to sketch – the kind of normative and institutional structure through which sustainability is to be pursued.

Now, although Robert Nozick is a leading figure and maybe the best-known thinker of libertarianism, he represents just one of the avenues of libertarian thinking – none of which converge easily with sustainability *or* environmentalism. As Marcel Wissenburg has pointed out, libertarianism is extremely shallow when it comes to environmental issues, although he adds that this appears to be an accidental defect rather than a necessary one (Wissenburg, 2011: 1). However, it is plain that libertarianism, in light of its main principles, does not allow easily for environmental concerns.

There are different ways of conceiving libertarianism, but the latter is essentially a political doctrine concerned with the individual right to self-determination (Vallentyne 2007: 187). Its departure point is the *priority* of natural rights, those that every human being possesses in the state of nature, and above all the



right to liberty. Yet libertarianism is not interested in a transcendent defence of rights, but rather in underlining that they exist before the state and even despite it. This priority operates in both a normative and a practical fashion, underpinning the justification of the minimal state – the only state that libertarians approve of. Normatively, rights are just protected by the state, but they are not created nor belong to it, which cannot either restrict them. From a practical point of view, it is not only more *fair* to let individuals organize themselves without interference from the state, it is also more *efficient*, since individual cooperation leads to a well-organized society. Individuals cooperate –and compete– in the market as much as in the civil society.

This twofold foundation roughly corresponds to a distinction between two schools of libertarianism. On the one hand, deontological libertarians are concerned with legitimacy, an action being morally legitimate if it respects the natural rights of all individuals. Together with Rothbard (1998) or Steiner (1994), Nozick himself is a deontological libertarian. It is thus interesting to note that, to him, people have natural rights because they share a “special human nature”, a person being special because it is

“a being able to formulate long-term plans for its life, able to consider and decide on the basis of abstract principles or considerations it formulates to itself and hence not merely the plaything of immediate stimuli, a being that limits its own behaviour in accordance with some principles or picture it has of what an appropriate life is for itself and others, and so on” (Nozick 2008: 49).

Interestingly, Nozick links this conception of human beings to the principle of the *separateness of persons*, which states that we are responsible for our preferences and decisions. I would say that the opposite of separateness is not sociality, since Nozick is too clever a philosopher to ignore not only our social nature, our inclination to mingle with others, but also the weight of social influences in the processes of preference formation. Nozick is not denying that *others* are an influence on us, but claiming that *we* are ultimately responsible for our decisions. It is a prescriptive argument, not a factual statement. His fear is that embracing the opposite premise – social influences trumping the individual – may lead to collective restrictions of individual liberty.

On their part, consequential libertarians are aligned with classical liberals of the Hayekian sort, both supporting freedom because it usually leads to better outcomes. A free society which secures a free market economy and contractarian freedom among individuals and associations is valuable not in itself, but because it is better for everyone. How to define *better* outcomes is a different matter, but libertarians assume that *everyone* will be more able to maximize their preferences in a regime of freedom and also that society as a whole will be better off that way.

This is interesting, because it concerns our problem, i.e. how to build up a sustainable society. There is no need to reproduce here *in extenso* the flaws that the libertarian answer may contain. They are all related to the lack of an authority enabled to impose a collective good – sustainability and the protection of nature – against individual rights that may well push in a very different direction. By definition, a minimal state cannot foster sustainability. Or can it? A consequentialist libertarian would argue that it would, once the members of society realizes that it is in their interest to cooperate in order to become sustainable. Yet in such a case the state could no longer be minimal, since the latter is not enough to promote sustainability in a complex society.

Needless to say, the most obvious problem for libertarianism would be to adopt sustainability as a societal goal in the first place. Although I am not concerned here with such compatibility, but rather interested in using a particular heuristic device – the framework for utopia – for coupling liberalism and sustainability, it is worth noting that libertarianism itself *could* make room for sustainability. To put it briefly, it could do so if the *need* for sustainability as a condition for human self-preservation is stressed.

Tibor Machan (2006) has reflected upon the adoption of basic social principles from a libertarian point of view. The question is how a social compact emerges or come into being. The latter is defined as the set of principles of community life that either actual or hypothetical participants in a community *agree* to be

legally bound by. Machan rejects purely consensual ways of agreeing about those principles, such as the one proposed by another libertarian, Jan Narveson, according to whom

“the principles of morality are (or should be) those principles for directing everyone’s conduct which it is reasonable for everyone to accept. They are the rules that everyone has good reason for wanting everyone to act on, and thus to internalize in himself or herself, and thus to reinforce in the case of everyone” (Narveson in Machan 2006: 328).

Machan rejects that reasonableness may constitute a valid foundation for consensus and hence for the building of a social compact. To Machan, reasonableness is not enough because agreement need not be reasonable and the question can be posed as to why should we be reasonable. What Machan is suggesting is that something *rougher* must underlie a social compact:

“any sound political system requires not only agreement (...) but also logically prior, non-conventionalist ethical principles, or, at any rate, some sort of natural drives (like a drive for self-preservation). I dispute the notion that social compacts by themselves can *establish* binding norms of any sort whatsoever, norms that can be demonstrated to obligate one to act one way or refrain from acting another way” (Machan, 2006: 321).

Machan argues that there must be some independent norm that underlie an agreement, or either an inborn motive or drive that impels the parties to live by the compact, in which case the norms are binding not because of the agreement *per se* “but because the agreement *had* to be made (so as to respond to fear of death, secure safety, or preserve life), then *had* to be followed by the self-interested parties to it” (Machan 2006: 322). Such is the actual motivation to abide by the norms derived from a social compact.

Irrespective of whether this thesis is found plausible or not, it offers a way for libertarianism to go green. Moreover, is a way of being green that leads naturally to an open conception of sustainability. After all, sustainability has to do with the kind of motives – “fear of death, secure safety, or preserve life” – that Machan alludes to as *real* motives for underlying an agreement about the social compact. If a society is not sustainable, there will be no society at all. Yet by its very nature, as we will see below, neither libertarianism nor liberalism can accept a way of being sustainable that hinders other possible ways of being sustainable.

On the other hand, even an open conception of sustainability would demand greater powers for the state than those usually granted by libertarianism. In other words, a social compact that includes sustainability in view of the need for individual and social self-preservation would necessarily transcend the minimal state. But is this a problem for libertarianism? It may just be a self-correction.

Be that as it may, the minimal state is an entity that nobody has ever seen, because there has never been one. But does that not suggest that its heuristic function is not to create a blueprint for an actual state, but to serve as a tool for the critical appraisal of existing states? In other words, the libertarian question about the state – namely, what *should* the state do? – is intended to shed light on the analysis of what the state *does* in practice. Because the minimal state itself, as well as *its* corresponding society, makes up for a truly liberal utopia, actually *the* liberal utopia par excellence. However, a liberal utopia must leave open the shape of the future society, since the latter will adopt the shape that society itself will spontaneously give itself. Yet it is also true that the goal of the libertarian remains the same: the greatest possible reduction of state intervention in society, in favor of the greatest achievable individual freedom. The belief that this freedom can actually be very large is what gives libertarian thinking an unmistakable utopian flavour.

## 6. Sustainability, state, and utopia.

Robert Nozick himself has explored this liberal utopianism, which is already implicit in any description of the social order that rests upon the spontaneous development of civil society and the market. Such order is based on the premise that there are many conceptions of the good life and hence different people striving for different goods that cannot be achieved simulatenously. Utopia is the possibility that *everyone* can live in the best conceivable world at the same time. But this utopia is liberal if it is not collective, but individual: they will be different worlds for different people. So that:

“In *our* actual world, what corresponds to the model of possible worlds is a wide and diverse range of communities which people can enter if they are admitted, leave if they wish to, shape according to their wishes; a society in which utopian experimentation can be tried, different styles of life can be lived, and alternative visions of the good can be individually or jointly pursued” (Nozick, 2008: 307).

Utopia is then a framework for the realization of multiple utopias: a meta-utopia. The government’s task will be to keep some general institutional structure and to guarantee individual rights in case of conflict or violation. This utopia is an emergent social order, because its final outcome –albeit always changeable– will be determined by the individual choices of many people along a considerable period of time. Such institutional structure is, of course, that of the minimal state (Nozick, 2008: 333).

Although we have explicitly discarded the minimal state as an institutional foundation for a sustainable society, the general idea behind Nozick’s view can be incorporated into a liberal democracy that is committed to sustainability as a general principle and embraces an open conception of the latter. In this regard, we are going to take a deontological libertarian and turn him into a consequentialist libertarian – or we rather make use of him as such.

Nozick’s interest is the maximisation of freedom in the pursuit of life-plans with minimum state coercion. He claims that a minimal state should be the most appropriate institutional organisation for fulfilling that end, since its main function would be the policing of voluntary contracts that different individuals and their associations would sign in order to realise each own’s conception of the good. Hence: “There is the framework for utopia, and there are the particular communities within the framework” (Nozick 2008: 332). Insofar as basic rights are not violated, nor the general institutional structure neutralised, there would be no limits for the coexistence of disparate life-plans. Of course, this framework is partly a utopia in itself, but it also reflects the underlying structure of liberal societies. Yet the most interesting insight for our purposes is the way in which it combines the general, overriding primacy of freedom as an abstract principle with the emergence of communities within which that very freedom could be partially restricted with the consent of their members: e.g. a Maoist community would be authorised to live within a liberal (or libertarian) society.

Now, can a similar scheme be applied to our topic? In a green liberal society, the argumentative debate about the most desirable version of sustainability would run parallel to the individual and collective action related to the practical achievement of sustainability: sustainable lifestyles, scientific innovation, international agreements, corporate adaptation, environmental education, and so on. These sustainability-related actions and ideas would be enacted or defended in both the public and private spheres, as embodying particular versions of sustainability. They are generally oriented to sustainability and particularly oriented to a specific version of it.

In other words, there is the framework for sustainability, and there are the particular sustainabilities pursued within the framework. Whereas the general primacy of freedom is guaranteed in Nozick’s libertarian society by the minimal state, the liberal state in a green society must make sure that the latter’s general orientation to sustainability is minimally successful in every given moment, that is, must demand that some requirements – for instance in matters of conservation, pollution, substitution – are met, while at the same time individuals and associations are free to practice and promote their preferred conception of the sustainable society.

Obviously, the comparison cannot be drawn until its completion, because sustainability requires a greater coordination in view of its structural challenges than the one demanded by a minimal state in order to guarantee some basic rights. But then again, no minimal state is vindicated here, so the comparison is, I would like to suggest, useful nonetheless. The resulting principle reads like this:

Society is generally orientated towards sustainability, but no pre-given model of the latter is to be enforced, rather the sustainable society will be the result of the ongoing debate and action that take place in both the public and the private spheres with the supervision of the state, so that citizens and associations are free to pursue their own conception of sustainability, provided that, by doing so, they do not hinder the equal freedom of others to do so, nor violate the public mandate to meet some minimum environmental standards.

Thus citizens are not forced to be green, but are encouraged to behave responsibly in a social frame where sustainability is institutionally recognised as a societal goal. However, the lack of a given blueprint for sustainability means that citizens are both free *from* sustainability and free *for* sustainability: they do not have to comply with a particular conception of the latter, although they must obey the environmental laws gradually adopted by the state, while at the same time they can pursue and promote their chosen view of a sustainable society – if they happen to have one.

Therefore, the desirable convergence of liberalism and environmentalism depends on the adoption of an open conception of sustainability. Thus the relationship between liberalism and green politics adopts a symbiotic character: liberal democracy provides the neutral framework wherein the principle of sustainability, incorporated into the values that guarantee the continuity of the former, is discussed. Henceforth, a viable socio-natural relationship is adopted as a general orientation of society. Sustainability, openly understood, can then be reformulated as a liberal principle. Thus:

“As to the *normative foundations* of both liberal democracy and environmentalism, there are good grounds to believe that environmental and liberal democratic values can cohere within a pluralistic conception of a reasonable, just and green society” (Levy and Wissenburg 2004: 195).

Although liberalism may not foster green values and lifestyles, it does not hinder their development either. After all, the former have emerged *but* in liberal contexts. And it is plain that liberal societies – thanks to, or in spite of, liberalism itself – are growing more concerned with the environment and sustainability. In an admittedly weak form, sustainability is already a liberal principle. It is indeed an open conception of sustainability, and it operates by default in developed societies.

Henceforth, the compatibility of liberalism and sustainability – and maybe a renewed environmentalism – is not just a theoretical possibility, but an incipient reality. And it is ecological citizenship that may serve as a theoretical *and* practical bridge between them.

## 7. Reassessing ecological citizenship.

It has been rightly pointed out that there are competing views on what ecological citizenship consists of, rather than there being an univocal model for it, meaning that ecological citizenship would actually remain “under construction” (see Valencia 2005). However, there is a dominant theoretical blueprint that serves as a basis for discussion – namely, the one brilliantly developed by Andrew Dobson (2003).

The most salient feature of ecological citizenship is the shift from an emphasis on rights to an emphasis on duties and responsibilities. Rather than as a holder of rights, the citizen is to be considered as a bearer of duties towards the environment. This entails a shift for the politics of sustainability, since a focus on attitudes and lifestyles involves the – mostly correct – belief that cultural change in the direction of sustainability does not germinate in the institutions, but on the civil society and the private realm, influencing governments in turn. The arena in which the ecological citizen is to act is *produced* by their material relationship with the environment. Think globally, act locally: the green approach to citizenship expresses a global orientation that questions the traditional, nationally-bounded, understanding of citizenship (Carter 2001: 5). This new relationship between the local and the global is mirrored by the new relationship between the single individual and the global environment, because it turns us into “citizens of the Earth” (Dobson 2000) or “citizens of the environment” (Bell 2005). Traditionally, citizenship has represented a relationship between the individual and the state, in which the two are bound together by reciprocal rights and obligations. Thus ecological citizenship proposes a new kind of bond, wherefrom a new kind of duty emerges, namely, the duty to reduce the occupation of ecological space, and doing so as a matter of justice (Dobson 2009: 135). Thus the *personal* relationship between the citizen and the environment leads to a *social* relationship between the community and the environment, and therefore the ecological citizen becomes the means for achieving an ecological community.

Is thus ecological citizenship a consistent foundation for building up the sustainable society and renewing green politics? The answer, it seems to me, is negative, unless we change the way in which we approach this ambiguous institution. Because, for all the appeal that non-reciprocal moral duties may possess, it is not the relationship between the citizen and the natural environment that should be stressed – but the one between citizens and sustainability.

We can begin by asking what exactly the content of ecological citizenship is. I would like to suggest that, insofar as none of the duties towards the environment that a citizen *should* bear is made legally binding, such content is nil. Ecological citizenship does not exist! Of course, it could be argued that this is precisely the idea: ecological citizenship has been depicted as stressing moral duties freely assumed by self-conscious citizens. In other words, then, its content is *practical* – it is made of people's actions on behalf of the environment on a basis of justice. If, as Bryan Turner (1994: 159) puts it, citizenship can be defined from a sociological point of view as the set of practices that constitute individuals as members of a community, ecological citizenship consists of and is produced by such practices, insofar as they reflect a sense of moral duty towards the natural world.

Yet this citizen is hard to find. As a consequence, there is an obvious contrast between the normative proposal for an ecological citizenship and its sociological reality. Again, it might be replied that such is, precisely, the idea: to create a blueprint for the *future* ecological citizenship that stresses the moral duties of the *current* citizens towards the environment. But it does not seem wise to ignore reality, or, we could even say, to *overburden* it with an unfeasible theoretical proposition. The fact remains that such a citizen is nowhere to be seen, nor will be easily generalised. Although the empirical studies that search for this particular kind of citizen are still scarce, their conclusions are not encouraging, whether they refer to the predictably careless Spain or to the environmentally committed Sweden (Valencia, Arias, and Vázquez 2010, Jagers 2009, Martinsson and Lundqvist 2010). In each and every case, the problem remains the same: a formidable gap between declared intentions and behaviors, that is, between what is *said* and what is *done*. This comes to show that there is no one-way relationship between values and action, but also points out the social, rather than individual, character of both values and practices (see Hards 2011). That is why the “willingness to act” that Jagers proposes as criteria for identifying an ecological citizen may be insufficient: talk, after all, is cheap. Still, such willingness may suffice if it is accompanied by a reasonable degree of action, no matter what exactly the *reasons* are that motivate it.

This means that, if we lighten the requirements for what counts as an ecological citizenship, the outlook may not be so gloomy. On the one hand, although it is dubious that a *deep* green virtue can be generalized, more *ordinary* green virtues may well spread (Martinsson and Lundqvist 2010: 532). But, in addition to that, there are normative reasons for such alleviation. They have to do with the need to define sustainability in an open way, as well as with linking ecological citizenship to the practical articulation of the former in the social arena.

It has already been stressed that the non-reciprocal duties towards the environment that constitutes the core of the strong interpretation of ecological citizenship are essentially moral duties. They are neither reciprocal, nor mandatory; besides, their lack of fulfilment is not punished. They belong to the realm of virtue. A virtue can be loosely defined as a *behaviour* orientated to the good that is *not* legally enforceable. If it is legally enforceable, then it is not virtuous. As Nozick himself suggests, moral duties are to flourish “in the interstice of rights”, because the state is not the only source of our moral obligations (Nozick 1984: 503). Or it shouldn't be.

In this regard, ecological citizenship can be said to belong to that current of contemporary political thinking that tries to rehabilitate virtue in the political and social realms, e.g. communitarianism and neo-republicanism. In the words of Robyn Eckersley: “green democratic theory seeks the politicisation of the private good as well as the re-politicisation of the public good” (Eckersley 2004: 96). However, as referred to nature, this politicisation seems to depend on the previous spreading – or imposition? – of ecocentric values. A deep interpretation of ecological citizenship is thus attached to an *ecological identity* that the individual is encouraged to assume, an identity wherefrom the right green behaviour stems. Such an identity is rooted in a moral view of socionatural relationships that leads to a personal assumption of

responsibilities that are in turn translated into duties. Yet this ethical deepness overburdens ecological citizenship, linking it to a moral perfectionism that, again, does not seem – if desirable – generalisable. As John Barry puts it, this approach

"demands too much, especially in the absence of any discussion of the balance to be struck between legitimate 'self-interest' and concern for others (...) [it] does not specify the reasons why ecological citizens care; rather it is assumed that by definition they care" (Barry 2002: 146).

Furthermore, a thick moralisation of this sort poses insurmountable problems for the institutionalisation of ecological citizenship's content. Moral duties and obligations belong – insofar as they are just that, moral – outside the legal system. Of course, some of these duties can be incorporated into the set of legally binding norms that constitute environmental law, but some of them not. We could even say that the first duty of *any* citizen is to abide by such laws. The rest is virtue.

It is in this context that Derek Bell (2005: 190) has defended the notion of “non-enforceable duties” as a foundation for ecological citizenship: duties that are suggested, but not imposed, by the state. They would be considered as public virtues, an aspect of the identity of a citizen qua citizen (Hailwood 2005: 203). This makes sense: some citizens are better than others in almost every conceivable realm. Therefore, the actual practice of some green virtues would *describe* a citizen as an ecological citizen. Hence it is the actual practice of virtue that makes the difference. But we should reject the idea that a previous list of acceptable/unacceptable green virtues can be set. There are, there must be, several ways of being an ecological citizen. Otherwise, the citizen would be forced to fit into a given description of the right ecological virtues. As defined by whom? Nobody can claim a monopoly on this definition. That is why I would like to suggest that we should enlarge the potential content of ecological citizenship by connecting it to an open conception of sustainability – that is, by connecting it to a framework for sustainability.

## 8. The framework for sustainability.

It can then be argued that there are many ways of being green, because there are many (albeit not infinite) ways of conceiving the sustainable society. Some of these ways involve taking care of the remaining natural world, some involve a reasonable use of resources, while still others entail a preference for technological innovation or, why not, the opposite. There is no such thing as the *right* green attitude, since there is no such thing as the *right* sustainable society. The supporter of a particular view of the latter, of course, will contest this claim – all the more if it holds a position that is hardly compatible with alternative approaches to sustainability, as is the case with ecocentrism or any other deep green approach.

In a liberal society that incorporates sustainability as a public goal, the most relevant rules of environmental behaviour for individuals and associations of any kind will be, sooner or later, translated into law. They will be enforceable. If we take for granted that any citizen must abide by any law, what does it then take to be an ecological citizen in a free green society? It takes, I suggest, doing *something* on behalf of a particular view of the sustainable society. It must be a free and conscious behaviour, be it a practical or a communicative action. But there is no previous restriction regarding the kind of behaviour that qualifies as acceptable for a citizen to be ‘ecological’. This entails recognition of the complexity of contemporary life and its many opportunities and layers of action:

“In sum, the source of the complexity I attribute to green citizenship is the intensely complex structure of contemporary political life. (...) The notion of complex green citizenship is based on the simple recognition that different kinds of political activities are possible and effective, in a word appropriate, in different contexts: green citizenship is complex precisely” (Trachtenberg 2010: 346).

Yet we can also refer to the complexity of contemporary life and to different kinds of activities without adding the adjective ‘political’. It is not necessary to behave *politically* to make a contribution to the preferred sustainable society. In a trivial sense, needless to say, everything is political. But the kind of actions that an ecological citizen can perform needs not to be explicitly political. It can be just a civic, domestic, or economic action – from supporting a green campaign to saving energy to purchasing some

certain goods. These actions do have political significance, insofar as they lend support *de facto* to a particular view of sustainability, but are not forcefully political.

I would like to suggest that this approach to ecological citizenship can benefit from a number of insights related to the idea of a deep citizenship, i.e. an active conception of citizenship that tries to go beyond its classical understanding as a set of entitlements. This is not an obvious connection, but I see it as a useful one. The classical roots of a deeper view of citizenship are evident in Hannah Arendt's (1999) conception of the political, according to which the individual is actually born again through participation in the public sphere. Such participation is conceived, in Aristotelian terms, as an end in itself. Of course, there is no *polis* anymore: the political action must be adapted to a different public space. Drawing on Arendt, Sheyla Benhabib (1992: 93) has proposed an *associational* conception of the public space, a space that emerges *whenever and wherever* men act together in concert. Therefore, the public sphere ceases to be a topographical or institutional place, being created instead by the action of citizens themselves. The limits of the political are thus blurred. As Barry Clarke puts it:

“an act of deep citizenship transcends these traditional distinctions. Deep citizenship is concerned less with the domain within which the act takes place than with the trajectory of an act. An act, from whatever domain, public or private, that is oriented to the particular, the private or the sectional is not an act of citizenship. By contrast an act from whatever domain that is oriented towards the universal is an act of deep citizenship” (Barry Clarke 1996: 82).

But, as I said, an act of deep citizenship does not have to be directly political. It just requires self-consciousness and a sense of purpose, so that we can distinguish it from those behaviours that simply follow a cultural or sociological inertia. In that sense they are *creative*, no matter how modest they may appear. After all, we all participate in the process of creating social reality, a process that can be seen as a daily negotiation adopting the form of a spontaneous order: as we all act, we all give shape to the social landscape. Moreover, it is not clear why a deep citizenship act must be *collective*, as Benhabib suggests when she refers to men “acting together in concert”. This might well be the case, but might as well not: an individual action should also be accepted as an expression of citizenship. Domestic or civic actions can be both individual and effective, and the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, with market actions. It is the (desirable) aggregation of virtuous or beneficial actions that makes the (collective) difference.

Therefore, in a society that has adopted an open sustainability as a public value, citizens can contribute to the latter in several ways. Some of them may barely entail *expressing* green values or *omitting* an environmentally harmful behaviour, whereas *participating* in environmental campaigns or social movements would be in the opposite end of personal commitment. This has been also pointed out from the point of view of civic republicanism: social and economic practices are also related to sustainability (Barry 2006). What counts is that a citizen possesses some degree of environmental awareness and hence defends in some way *some* version of sustainability – regardless of the moral judgment that a supporter of some *other* version can hold. Upon these premises, an ecological citizen can be defined as:

A citizen who, possessing a changeable degree of commitment, which can be expressed in a number of realms (the moral, the domestic, the public) in several ways, makes some kind of personal contribution to the achievement of some form of sustainable society.

This is an open definition of ecological citizenship that corresponds to an open conception of sustainability. The ensuing coexistence between different behaviours and communicative actions, each expressing a particular view of the sustainable society, will take place in the non-institutional as well as in the institutional realms, so that the state will translate into legislation the cultural changes that become consolidated enough (let us remember that the state will impose the environmental standards that add up to a ‘minimal’ sustainability). As Neuteleers has suggested in connection to green lifestyles, they are a sign to policy-makers and they influence other people through citizen-citizen diffusion (Neuteleers 2010: 514). Whereas lifestyle is a way of living, ecological citizenship is a way of behaving that ends up giving shape to certain lifestyles.

Thus there can be no doubt that ecological citizenship does not have to be conceived in a deep moral way in order to possess political significance. Furthermore, I take this to be a more realistic definition of what ecological citizenship *may* be in practice. Let us not forget that a too strict definition of the latter can be impossible to cope with for actual citizens, who are normally full of duties and short of time (see MacGregor 2006). It is also in this way that the deep green focus on guilt and burden can be compensated with some measure of critical reflectiveness, agency, hope, and opportunity (Gabrielson 2008). A more enticing narrative for sustainability can thus emerge.

### **9. Conclusion: liberalism, libertarianism.**

I have tried to sketch a realistic prospect for a green liberal society, i.e. a society that remains liberal while going green. The latter means that this society assumes a commitment to sustainability, one that, as I see it, is already implicit in the normative structure of our democracies – be it constitutionally recognized or not. To that end, I have approached political ideologies and theories in a non-orthodox way, taking from them some ideas or principles and combining them with those coming from others. More specifically, I have argued that a liberal society should embrace an open conception of sustainability, the achievement of which would be pursued in a framework for sustainability that resembles the one devised by Robert Nozick for a libertarian society wherein freedom, instead of sustainability, was the goal. In turn, ecological citizenship is suggested as the key institution for realizing sustainability within such framework.

Nevertheless, a reformulation of ecological citizenship is no guarantee that enough citizens will engage themselves in an environmentally conscious behaviour. This must not be a tragedy, provided that the state is able to set a number of standards that avoid a path of unsustainability. But then again, it is obvious that a society where this kind of citizen abounds will be more easily sustainable and also a richer, more diverse one – especially if we take sustainability as a framework for discussing the way in which we wish to live. A problem is then how these citizens can emerge without significantly violating their freedom to follow their preferred life-plans.

However, in a liberal society that has assumed a mandate to sustainability, some nudges should be considered acceptable. They are a way of promoting a virtuous behaviour, in a realm where ‘virtue’ is easy to define: a behaviour that contributes to some kind of sustainable society. It must be noted, though, that people are free to *not* act virtuously if they so choose. They can be impervious to environmental issues, prefer a fully technological culture, or defend human superiority over the natural world. Yet they will not be allowed to behave in a way that hinders or prevent the achievement of the ‘minimal’ sustainability embodied in environmental laws. As citizens, they must abide by those laws.

On the other hand, not everyone among those who ‘choose’ virtue, however, count as ecological citizens. The reason is clear: practices of citizenship require a certain degree of self-consciousness. Those who just respond to the nudge are not promoting a view of the sustainable society, nor practicing virtue in a reflective manner. By making this distinction, we preserve a special status for ecological citizenship – as an institution based on the self-conscious promotion of *a* view of sustainability. However, it is not necessary either to possess a sophisticated position on the issue in order to count as a promoter of a given sustainable society. It suffices that the citizen believes that some kind of societies are better than others and act correspondingly.

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