



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Spash, Clive L. "Editorial: A Worthwhile Academic Life."  
*Environmental Values* 17, no. 2, (2008).  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6026>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2008. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

## A Worthwhile Academic Life

The good academic life is a hard one to follow and has become no easier in the past 50 years. Each academic is now to be treated as if a small business enterprise. Expectations are that accounts will be kept of all activities which are to be listed and weighed-up for net worth and value added. Inputs will be judged as wasted if outputs are insufficient or not of the 'right sort', e.g., articles in appropriate journals. Of course what is right becomes what is measurable, e.g., citations. Measures become goals and regulatory devices; so soon there is no academic freedom at all, just inputs, outputs and targets. There is no higher education, just providers and consumers. Don't be foolish and try to educate your students, just keep the customer satisfied (make sure they have the exam answers and all pass) and get good teaching assessments for yourself.

In such a world Aristotle's ideal of achieving wisdom, virtue and happiness through contemplation is increasingly difficult to sustain. Academics who aspire to such goals and see themselves as contributing amongst friends to a wider community for the general good are becoming an endangered species. So people like Alan Holland, who managed to maintain some semblance of the academic ideal, and instil that in others, are to be valued.

I first met Alan about eighteen years ago, in Glasgow at Strathclyde University, when he came to advise a group I'd been involved with which was establishing a new interdisciplinary course in environmental management, including modules in ethics and economics. Shortly after that philosophers and sociologists at Lancaster University became very active on environmental issues and especially so in their highly reflective and open critiques of mainstream economics. I was lucky to be involved at various meetings debating a variety of issues. One outcome was the Thingmount series,<sup>1</sup> to which Alan contributed, and another was the book edited by John Foster (1997). The journal *Environmental Values* also emerged from the spirit and dynamic created by Alan and his colleagues in Lancaster at that time. Communication and friendships spread wider as a series of European Community projects brought in new collaborators and established an international network of interdisciplinary scholarship.

In a world where value is measured in terms of outputs, citations and other targets, the worth of a person's contribution can easily be belittled or totally missed. When I ran the Environmental Valuation in Europe (EVE) project, Alan

---

<sup>1</sup> A Thingmount is a small mound constructed as a Norse meeting-place. The only such site known to still exist on the UK mainland is in the Lake District National Park near Little Langdale, not far from Lancaster. The changes to this site formed one of the examples used in Holland and O'Neill (1996).

made great contributions to the workshops. He of course contributed 'outputs' (e.g., Leist and Holland, 2000, and an *Environmental Values* special issue, Volume 9 No.4), but more important were the kind of interactions brought forth in a spirit of giving and learning. I remember Alan summarising rights-based thinking, not as an advocate but in response to the dominant utilitarian positions being put forward by others. He gave a wonderful and succinct appraisal which I was fortunate to capture, as we recorded all sessions, and this allowed me to go back and consider what Alan had said in detail. This helped my own approach to the subject with respect to intergenerational ethics.

The success of this journal also owes a great debt to Alan, his sense of community and vision. His editorials over the years have a wealth of interesting remarks, comments and sharp observations on key issues. These have stimulated articles (Attfield, 2005), contributed to authors' thoughts (e.g., Leonard, 2007), and some have been widely cited themselves (e.g., Holland, 1994).

As I have often found, Alan has wonderful insights which are often simply put but required one to go away and reflect seriously. I fear some economists too often just dismiss philosophers, such as Alan, as irrelevant to their 'pragmatic' approach to policy. Like too many modern academics, they rarely take the time to conduct serious reflective contemplation of their subject or activities. Accredited production within the domains of your chosen industrial sector is what mostly counts. Acceptance amongst a peer group is more than adequate so why bother considering what those from outside might think?

One environmental economist I knew attended a presentation by Alan (later published as Holland, 1995) and in telling me of it dismissed the content in derogatory terms: asserting that monetary valuation of the environment was a political necessity, trade-offs were self evident truths, consumers were sovereign and preferences should remain unquestioned. Cost-benefit practitioners could certainly get away with this in the past, but because of the efforts of Alan and people like him, this same person can now be found discussing construction of preferences, the need for deliberative approaches and observing more closely the limits of cost-benefit analysis. Though still firmly embedded within the neo-classical economic orthodoxy, this economist is no longer so blusteringly self-confident in the righteousness of their former position. There is plenty inside this issue of *Environmental Values* to stimulate further rethinking.

This special issue is an extra large edition because of the many who wanted to acknowledge Alan. More could easily have been added but we had to draw a line. The editorial team has combined its efforts in putting together what we hope highlights something of Alan's work and the esteem in which he is held. This has been undertaken without Alan's knowledge so we hope the result comes as a pleasant surprise for him. Within are contributions both by past students of Alan's (Dan Firth and Gill Aitken), ex-Lancaster colleagues (John O'Neill and John Benson) and colleagues from across the world (Ted Benton, Andy Dobson, Dale Jamieson, Bryan Norton, Mark Sagoff and myself). Alan's interdisciplinary

## A WORTHWHILE ACADEMIC LIFE

influence is also evident in the contributors coming from public policy, political science, economics and philosophy. The topics covered reflect upon a variety of Alan's interests including the classics, the meaning of a worthwhile life, the moral considerability of non-human species, the role of valuation in economics and deliberative democracy.

Alan has made great contributions to the community via his work in the Philosophy Department at Lancaster University – teaching, lecturing, debating, discussing and writing – and through establishing this journal. Without such efforts I doubt topics like incommensurability and decision-making without prices would now be appearing in environmental economics journals. The fact that they are is a tribute to what Alan has achieved via establishing *Environmental Values* and the role this has played in helping change the context of debate from that which existed 20 years ago.

Of course we have a long way to go and much more to do. Only some listen and many have closed ears and eyes, but the environmental, and related social, problems we face make such a position no longer tenable. Alan's co-authored book reviewed by Bryan Norton in this issue shows new ways forward (O'Neill, Holland and Light, 2007). I hope Alan will continue to produce and contribute to such work. As the narrative of his life continues to unfold I hope he will follow the advice I have heard him quote from Dylan Thomas, which I also take as something of a personal motto:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

To that end Alan will continue to be an important part of the journal team and the interdisciplinary community of scholars he has done much to help create and maintain in his own unassuming way.

CLIVE L. SPASH

## REFERENCES

- Aitken, G. 2008. 'Animal suffering: an evolutionary approach'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 165–180, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303837.
- Attfield, R. 2005. 'Unprojected value, unfathomed caves and unspent nature: Reply to an editorial'. *Environmental Values* **14**(4): 513–518, doi: 10.3197/096327105774462656.
- Benson, J. 2008. 'Aesthetic and other values in the rural landscape'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 221–238, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303864.
- Benton, T. 2008. 'Environmental values and human purposes'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 201–220, doi:10.3197/096327108X303855.

- Dobson, A. 2008. 'Nature (and politics)'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 285–301, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303891.
- Firth, D. 2008. 'Do meaningful relationships with Nature contribute to a worthwhile life?' *Environmental Values* **17**: 145–164, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303828.
- Foster, J., ed. 1997. *Valuing Nature? Economics, Ethics and Environment*. London: Routledge.
- Holland, A. 1994. 'One wants and one wants not to want'. *Environmental Values* **3**(1): 1–2.
- Holland, A. 1995. 'The assumptions of cost-benefit analysis: A philosopher's view', in K.G. Willis and J.T. Corkindale (eds.), *Environmental Valuation: New Perspectives* (Wallingford: CAB International), pp. 21–38.
- Holland, A. and J. O'Neill. 1996. 'The integrity of nature over time: Some problems'. *Thingmount Working Paper* No. 8 (Lancaster: Philosophy Dept, Lancaster University, in association with BANC), 15pp.
- Jamieson, D. 2008. 'The rights of animals and the demands of nature'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 181–199, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303846.
- Leist, A. and A. Holland. 2000. 'Conceptualising Sustainability'. EVE Policy Brief No.5 (Cambridge: Cambridge Research for the Environment), 22 pp.
- Leonard, L. 2007. 'Environmentalism in Ireland: Ecological modernisation versus populist rural sentiment'. *Environmental Values* **16**(4): 463–484, doi: 10.3197/096327107X243240.
- Norton, B. 2008. 'Environmental Values: An Appreciation'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 303–306, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303909.
- O'Neill, J. 2008. 'Happiness and the Good Life'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 125–144, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303819.
- O'Neill, J., A. Holland and A. Light. 2007. *Environmental Values*. London: Routledge.
- Spash, C.L. 2008. 'How much is that ecosystem in the window? the one with the bio-diverse trail'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 259–284, doi: 10.3197/096327108X303882.