# Consequential Choices in a Challenging Time

As I write this from Colorado on the eve of the U.S. presidential election, I wonder, 'Who are we? What kind of people do we want to be, what kind of society?' Of course, there is not much of a collective 'we' in the United States these days – rather, there are many: the country is more polarised than ever, and not only with respect to our divergent newsfeeds, though these are tied to and reinforce many other divides (cf. Elias and Hmielowski 2020). People in this country are deeply divided on many entangled issues: environment, economy, immigration, race, and of course, the COVID-19 pandemic.

On a short walk around the neighbourhood yesterday evening, I had the opportunity to converse briefly with two people. One was sitting in his front yard, watching his young daughter, who was dressed up for Hallowe'en, playing. The pair were poised to greet – from afar – trick-or-treaters on this most unusual of Hallowe'ens. Thoughtfully, they had packed and carefully lined up 50 small bags of treats on the low rock wall at the edge of their property, bordering the sidewalk. My husband and I waved hello, admiring the display. The girl's father returned the wave, explaining that they wanted to offer something for Hallowe'en in this pandemic-ridden year, to provide a safe opportunity for kids to trick-or-treat. This way, he noted, children could grab a bag without touching any of the other bags, and at a safe distance from others. It was an effort to salvage a holiday from the ravages of pandemic, even as the prevalence of the disease in our state and county were on the rise. If only people would just take some basic precautions, the man lamented, things could be so much better. We thanked the two of them for their efforts and continued on our way.

A block later, we turned a corner, onto the street where we live. From the open door of a home about halfway down the block, we could hear a buzz of voices. Glancing over as we passed the house, we saw more than a dozen people gathered, maskless, socialising in close quarters. In a bid to curb the exponential rise in COVID-19 diagnoses, the state had recently mandated that personal gatherings be limited to 10 people from no more than two households. As we continued down the block, a middle-aged couple stepped out of their parked car and onto the sidewalk. We pulled up our masks and moved to the side to give the couple more space to pass. As they walked by, one of the pair spoke up, '*We're* not wearing masks', he said pointedly, apparently irritated. 'Why not?' My husband asked. 'Bad math and bad science', the man retorted, with an edge in his voice. We kept walking.

It was hard to digest the man's anger. I understand the frustration of a pandemic that continues for months on end. I understand the sadness of being unable to visit ageing parents. And I understand the disappointment of children – including my own – for whom 'school' means logging into a computer at 8:30 in the morning and logging off only briefly at 4, before returning to the screen to complete the assigned homework for the day. But even understanding

all that, I found it hard to digest the anger that two people, walking down the sidewalk wearing masks, seemed to provoke.

Two encounters, two different choices about how to engage with others and how to orient toward the challenges people all across the world currently face. Life during the pandemic feels cluttered with choices: What is the safest way to get groceries? Should one wear a mask when walking around the neighbourhood? What forms of socialising are ok? How best to navigate situations when one person's understandings of safety and liberty clash with those of another? These are individual choices, but together, they comprise collective ones, just as the individual votes cast in the U.S. presidential election add up to express a collective decision about who will lead this country for the next four years. Underlying these collective choices remains disagreement and ambivalence, but there are many moments when decisions must be made, and these decisions and individuals' roles in them do say something about who we are – as individuals, local communities, nations and beyond – and who we want to be. Electing national leaders and responding to the pandemic are two domains where these identity-entangled decisions play out, but the environmental arena is rife with such decisions as well. What kinds of policies should be adopted to mitigate and adapt to climate change? To what extent should environmental decisions take into account effects on biodiversity, and on what grounds should such decisions be made? How might collective choices consider both current and future human needs, along with concerns for broader ecological health?

These questions are at the heart of the articles included in the current issue of *Environmental Values*. Ranging from empirically-oriented studies focusing on public beliefs and attitudes to more conceptually and philosophically-focused arguments, these papers address how people living near Sydney, Australia think about sea level rise and climate adaptation; how car-owners in Oslo, Norway view climate mitigation policies; and how individuals and collectives might approach and reason about decisions involving biodiversity, sustainable building practices and 'hard environmental choices', in which various alternative pathways reflect different priorities, and no option is better than any other on all counts. The papers probe the relationship between individual beliefs, values, and attitudes and collective choices. The first two are primarily descriptive, and the latter three more normative. All represent efforts to understand more fully the basis for important collective decisions that will shape human relations with one another and the broader world at multiple scales in space and time.

This issue opens with two articles that explore public values and attitudes in relation to climate change. The first, by Anne Maree Kreller, seeks to understand commonalities and differences in the values and beliefs of Botany Bay residents in relation to sea level rise and climate adaptation. Kreller's article takes as its starting point the notion of transformative adaptation, which emphasises just participation and community engagement in adaptation decisions.

The research thus sought to explore what community members value about living in Botany Bay, their beliefs about sea level rise, and their views on the fairness of government adaptation planning processes. As a result of community surveys, Kreller identified four distinct interpretive communities in Botany Bay, Australia with various levels of concern, place-related values, and conceptions of fairness. Taking account of differences across groups may enable adaptation planners to adopt engagement strategies appropriate to community members with a range of values and perspectives.

The second article also concerns climate change, though in this case the authors focus on attitudes toward greenhouse gas emissions policies among car-owners in Oslo. Marianne Aasen and Arild Vatn investigate how institutional contexts (understood in terms of conventions, norms and rules) affect public attitudes towards emissions policies. In particular, Aasen and Vatn sought to understand how two texts – one emphasising individual rationality and the other emphasising social rationality – shaped participants' attitudes toward two possible measures aimed at reducing driving: 1) an increase in gas prices and 2) infrastructural changes that provide less space for cars. They found that those classified as 'individualists' based on a prior study differed in their responses to the texts as compared to 'non-individualists' identified in the earlier study. However, Aasen and Vatn also drew some cross-cutting conclusions, suggesting that '[a] position somewhere between 'me-logic' and 'they-logic', which is neither purely altruistic nor purely self-oriented, may… be a better normative imperative' for emissions reductions policies overall (p. 58).

Geetanjali Date, Deborah Dutta, and Sanjay Chandrasekharan also orient their paper around frameworks for decision-making. However, they focus specifically on frameworks that shape the design of technologies, food and energy systems, and infrastructure. They worry that the 'building instinct' has become problematically dominated by efficiency considerations, which emphasise the economic benefits of delivering the greatest amount of output per unit of input. Although there is nothing wrong with efficiency *per se*, argue Date et al., a single-minded focus on efficiency can crowd out other important considerations such as human health and ecological well-being. As an alternative, the authors suggest an approach initially developed by Wendell Berry (1981) called 'solving for pattern' (SfP). This approach emphasises restraint and reciprocity, along with attention to the larger social and ecological patterns into which a particular designed system fits. Case studies illustrate the SfP approach and how it diverges from the efficiency paradigm.

The final two papers in this issue focus on reasons and justification for environmental decisions. Patrik Baard explores holistic and individualistic reasons for biodiversity conservation, and Espen Dyrnes Stabell considers how to make environmental choices in hard cases, 'where agents find their options to be neither better than, worse than nor equal to each other' (p. 112). Baard

draws on the epistemic value of parsimony to argue that biocentric individualist accounts in support of biodiversity are preferable to holistic ecocentric ones, because individualist accounts rest on fewer presuppositions. When assessing the parsimoniousness of a particular ethical theory, Baard identifies three key factors: the number of axiological concepts involved, the number of background assumptions needed to support these concepts, and – where relevant – 'the length of chains of indirect duties or the number of principles' (p. 95). On Baard's view, biocentric individualism can support biodiversity conservation in two ways: first, caring for individual living things will itself support biodiversity. Second, insofar as individual living beings depend on biodiversity for their own sustenance and flourishing, biocentric individualism provides a reason to conserve biodiversity. Such accounts, according to Baard, avoid appeals to the intrinsic value of ecosystems and other assumptions that rest on further presuppositions that are difficult to defend. Of course, one challenge in a polarised world is that the assumptions that appear obvious to some are controversial and indefensible from the perspective of others. Baard may be right that in some epistemic communities, biocentric individualism is a more parsimonious approach to biodiversity conservation than ecocentric holism. However, what counts as parsimonious itself will depend on the background assumptions of a given epistemic community – thus, Baard's paper opens pathways to further research on how epistemic values like parsimony can play a role in justification in a diverse and sometimes divided world.

The final article in this issue focuses on hard environmental choices. There are many reasons that environmental choices may be hard, including fundamental disagreements among those deciding or those that they represent. Stabell focuses on a particular type of hard choice, in which multiple criteria are in play, but no option is better than the others in relation to all criteria. To illustrate this situation, Stabell imagines an ethics committee charged to decide whether to proceed with a deep sea mining project where the committee '[does] not find any option clearly better or worse than the other, but do not find them equally good either' (p. 113). Although the criteria being employed are not decisive between the two options, the two options are not equivalent to one another, and the choice is consequential. Stabell suggests that in cases such as these, considerations of moral identity may help guide a decision. This approach requires asking questions like the ones with which this editorial began: 'Who are we? What kind of people do we want to be, and what kind of society?' Stabell points to two dimensions of moral identity, the communal (the extent to which a given community shares a particular identity) and the historical (how a community made decisions in the past, and the moral identity embedded in those decisions). Invocations of moral identity can draw on both dimensions, though – as Stabell acknowledges – 'particular identities can be morally problematic', thus moral identities themselves 'are subject to normative constraints' (p. 125). Moral identities may be contested, and Stabell

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notes that it competing moral identities pose a particular challenge: how might these different identities be negotiated or reconciled?

Here in the U.S., competing collective identities are very much in play – and the presidential election can be seen, in part, as a referendum on the nation's existing and aspirational moral identity, with implications within and beyond this country's borders. From my own vantage point in an anxious nation at the edge of national elections, the choices currently in progress look quite consequential. All of the issues discussed here, and more, are at stake. Social, political and environmental issues are intertwined, and recent work suggests that democracy itself may be threatened by failures to address climate change and broader issues of environmental sustainability (Felicetti 2020). By the time this issue goes to press, I hope the outcome of the election will be resolved. However, the need to consider the reasons for and relationships between individual and collective decisions will remain, as will ongoing efforts to make and remake the moral identities that guide these decisions.

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