Foreword

My reactions to this volume are principally of wonderment and of congratulation. This book is about what really matters to human life on the planet. Human wellbeing (and non-human wellbeing) should be our central concern as economists and social scientists. We are also starting to recognize what environmentalists have believed for a long time: the natural environment provides the foundation of people's lives and of civilization. As I write this, I have BBC radio on in the background. The BBC reporters are, at this moment in late summer in 2019 and literally as I type on my computer this afternoon, describing thousands of fires that are burning simultaneously across the Amazon rain forest in Brazil. This destruction of a vital environmental resource provides a salient example of the environmental changes that constitute the background for this volume and vividly illustrates that it is a timely contribution.

One of the contributions of the chapters in this volume is to provide a scientific way to prove – I believe I am using the word advisedly – the value of environmental influences for human wellbeing. Ultimately, the idea in the volume is that human happiness is a function of clean air, green space, lack of excessive noise, many other kinds of environmental influences, income, and standard social science variables. Crucially, the research literature blends this kind of conceptual approach with regression-equation techniques.

What then emerges, regardless of different approaches and alternative technical details, is estimates of the size of the effects of environmental factors upon the happiness and wellbeing of humans. In particular, by using data on reported happiness and life satisfaction, it is possible to calculate the 'happiness' marginal rate of substitution between factors such as clean air and income. For anyone interested in the history of social science, I recall looking at my first happiness equation in the year 1992 at the London School of Economics (in work with colleagues such as Andrew Clark and David Blanchflower) and, although I never dreamed then of entering environment variables as covariates, asking myself whether equations of this sort, and especially the notion of exploiting the estimated income coefficients, might ever be taken seriously by economists. It took a long and somewhat painful period to get referees at economics journals to be (if only partly) won over, and it will probably be half a century yet before that process is close to complete. But I would like particularly to salute certain colleagues for their seminal work: I recommend any young reader especially to read the five early papers listed below. I wish I had written them.

In my own view, these methods hand an intellectual tool not only to academia but also to committed environmentalists, and a potential lifeline to human beings.

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