



How not to argue against growth: happiness, austerity and inequality

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John O'Neill 'How not to argue against growth: happiness, austerity and inequality' in R. Hartmut and C. Henning eds. *The Good Life Beyond Growth* London: Routledge, 2018

One of the central claims made by critics of growth is a claim about well-being: the ending of continuous economic growth is consistent with or, more strongly, a condition of, the maintenance or improvement of well-being. There are good arguments for this claim (O'Neill 2006, 2008a & b). Here, however, I will be principally concerned with versions of the argument for the claim that critics of growth should avoid. Two arguments for the claim that have been particularly popular amongst critics of growth have serious weaknesses. The first is the appeal to subjective well-being and the Easterlin paradox – that economic growth has not been correlated with a rise in subjective well-being. The second is the appeal to the concept of gross national happiness and its use in Bhutan as an exemplar of how well-being should be measured. I will argue that both have serious problems. Problems of adaptation mean that arguments that appeal to subjective well-being fail to address problems of inequality both within and across generations. The absence of a change in subjective well-being in conditions of austerity is indicative of the problems. A robust defence of the well-being claim needs to appeal to objective state accounts of well-being. The appeal to gross national happiness highlights problems of treating debates about well-being in a depoliticised fashion, ignoring the politics that underpin some concepts of well-being and the ways that they can support forms of oppression and inequality. It also illustrates a failing of much radical politics of the past 100 years which might be called the politics of radical tourism – the belief in a utopia that is always somewhere else.

To criticise these arguments is not to claim there is no case against growth. There are stronger arguments from limits, justice and freedom, as well as sounder arguments from well-being. Since most of this paper is an exercise in how not to argue for degrowth, the first section will briefly review some of the stronger of the arguments against growth.

How to argue against growth

Climate change

A central argument for degrowth concerns what is physically possible given the impacts of climate change on the physical conditions for human life and livelihood. In making this argument a distinction has to be made between two senses of growth: growth in the physical sense – the increase in the energy and physical throughput of the economy; growth in the sense of rising GDP – the increase in the total monetary value of the goods and services in an economy. The two concepts are logically distinct. It is logically possible to have increasing GDP and a decreasing physical and energy throughput in an economy. However, it is a fallacy to move from claims about what is logically possible to claims about what is physically possible and another from what is physically possible to what is empirically actual. When one turns from logical possibilities to physical possibilities and empirical actualities, there is a relationship between increasing GDP and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. GDP measures consumption for goods and services over which there are market transactions or over which market prices can be imputed. Some of these goods and services may have no direct associated emissions – say buying a tip for a horse race – and some may even contribute to a reduction in emissions – say buying a seedling for a tree one intends to grow. However, empirically most goods and services which people pay for have a carbon footprint. So it is unsurprising that there has been a close correlation between increasing

consumption in marketed goods and services and increasing emissions. Given a static or rising population and growth in per capita consumption, all other things being equal, there will be a growth in physical and energy throughput and a corresponding growth in greenhouse gas emissions.

Proponents of green growth claim that all other things are not equal. Falls in the carbon intensity of consumption can lead to not just a relative but absolute decoupling of growth in GDP and rising emissions. Technological change and a shift in consumption from things to services will lead to a combination of continuing growth and declining rates of emissions. The problem with this argument is that it is empirically weak. While there has been some relative decoupling and a flattening of the rate of increase in emissions, there is little evidence to support the claim that the absolute decoupling at levels required to avoid dangerous climate change is likely or possible (Jackson 2009). Since emissions are cumulative – emissions from CO₂ and some other greenhouse gases will remain in the atmosphere for long periods of time – peak emissions need to happen sooner rather than later. (Anderson & Bows 2012; Anderson & Bows 2008 and 2011; Bows & Barrett 2010). There is no good empirical evidence for the belief that the level of decoupling of increasing emissions and growth in GDP is likely within the time frames required to avoid dangerous climate change.

Arguments from justice

A second group of arguments appeal to considerations of global justice and inequality. One is an argument from justice in the use of common or collective resources. It is unjust, as Goodin puts it, to “allow some co-owners of a common property resource to use it in certain ways, without allowing all co-owners to use it similarly” (Goodin 1994, 585). The atmosphere is a common resource. It is unjust that some consume in ways that cause emissions that could not be generalised to all without causing serious climate change. Hence the patterns of consumption of those responsible for luxury emissions are unjust. A second argument appeals to the needs of the worst off. Large parts of the population of the globe live at levels of consumption that fail to meet basic needs. It is a duty of justice that those levels of need are met. If it is a condition of meeting those needs and keeping emissions within dangerous levels that those on luxury emissions emit less, then justice demands a fall in luxury emissions (Shue 1993). A third argument appeals to the condition of those on the commodity frontier: the continuous expansion of the economy requires the extraction of resources and disposal of waste which disproportionately harms the lives and livelihoods of marginalised and poor communities (Martinez-Alier et. al 2010).

Arguments from freedom

A third set of arguments in the Marxian tradition appeal to human freedom. A distinguishing feature of modern capitalist societies that is responsible for continuing growth is the reinvestment of surplus value into productive processes that allow for not just the reproduction but the expansion of the productive capacity of an economy. It contrasts with the use of surplus in earlier societies, where it was employed to reproduce the social power and standing of those who lived off surplus labour and to maintain their time free of labour. For Marx, this shift in the use of surplus labour is both a source of human liberation and a source of unfreedom. It is a source of liberation:

[T]he old view, in which the human being appears as the aim of production . . . seems to be very lofty when contrasted to the modern world, where production appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production. In fact, however, what is wealth other than the universality of human needs, capacities, pleasures and productive capacities etc., created through universal exchange. (Marx 1973, 487–488)

Universal market exchange also releases producers from relations of dependency on particular persons (Marx 1973, 163). However, at the same time the shift also creates a form of unfreedom – ‘objective dependency’. The forces that drive growth in modern capitalist societies are systemic. Capitalists as capitalists are forced to recycle the surplus into expanding production as a condition of their existence (Marx 1970, ch.4). Declining growth within the context of a capitalist economy is a sign of an economy in crisis. All actors are “the plaything of alien powers” (Marx 1974, 220). On this Marxian line of argument, a post-growth society is one in which production again is not for production’s sake, but subordinated to human needs. As such, it is one in which production comes under human conscious control. Growth no longer has a life of its own to which the lives of human beings are subordinated.

Arguments from decommodification

A fourth set of arguments against growth are de-commodification arguments. The growth in GDP is a consequence not just of increasing consumption of goods and services as such, but also of their increasing marketisation. Only those goods and services that are the subject of market exchanges or are imputed a monetary value contribute to growth in GDP. Selling blood or bodily parts contributes to GDP. Donating blood or bodily parts does not. Knowledge that is commodified through intellectual property rights contributes to GDP. Knowledge that is freely available does not contribute directly to GDP. Paid care work adds to GDP. Care within family, friendship and community networks does not. There are independent normative arguments against the growing marketisation of goods in capitalist society (Anderson 1993; O’Neill 1998; Satz 2010; Sandel 2013; Walzer 1983). These include: injustices in the outcome of market transactions in conditions of inequality of wealth and power; the incompatibility of market relations with social practices and relationships that are conditions of human well-being; failures of respect for human dignity and vulnerability; forms of environmental degradation associated with market modes of governance, and the absence of market solutions to those failures (O’Neill 2007; 2016). Recapturing and expanding the domains of activity outside of the market place constitute a form of degrowth.

Arguments from well-being

Finally, there are arguments from well-being. Any plausible criticism of growth relies upon a distinction between increasing economic growth and improving human well-being, knowledge and culture. As Mill put it, a stationary state economy “implies no stationary state of human improvement” (Mill 1848, IV.6.9). The claim that the absence of growth is consistent with the maintenance or improvement of human well-being returns discussion of well-being to a classical question: Are there bounds to the goods required for a happy or flourishing life? The classical answer in Aristotelian and Epicurean traditions was that bounds do exist to the goods required for a happy life (O’Neill 2006; 2008a & b). That answer survives into some central texts of modern economics. Consider for example the

paper on saving by Ramsey in which he introduces the formula that still forms the starting point for debates about discounting. A claim that Ramsey defends in that paper that has disappeared from contemporary discussion is that there is a “maximum obtainable rate of enjoyment or utility” which he terms ‘Bliss’ (Ramsey 1928, 545). The point of saving for a community is to have that level of goods at which they reach or approximate to Bliss. Beyond that point saving is no longer required. Ramsey assumes that there are limits to the goods required for a good life.

That assumption has disappeared from modern economic textbooks. Rather the opposite is assumed, that more is better. The rational economic agent prefers more goods to less. As Gauthier puts it: “Appropriation has no natural upper bound. Economic man seeks more”. (Gauthier 1986, 318). Given the preference satisfaction theory of well-being that lies at the basis of neo-classical welfare economics – that well-being consists in the satisfaction of preferences – then it follows that there are no limits to the goods required for well-being.

The assumption that more is always better is one that has been open to criticism from two different directions that have their origins in classical Epicurean and Aristotelian perspectives on well-being. Both have been influential on discussions of degrowth. However, both can take problematic forms. In following I outline how not to argue from well-being to degrowth.

How not to argue for degrowth

Subjective well-being

One standard line of argument for degrowth is an appeal to the finding of Easterlin and others that above a certain level, growth in GDP is no longer correlated with a growth in subjective well-being as measured by self-reported life-satisfaction (Petridis, Muraca & Kallis 2015, 179; Porrit 2003). The graph for the UK is fairly typical. While relative income within a society at any point in time is positively correlated with life-satisfaction – the wealthier express higher life satisfaction – absolute increases in GDP over time are not. There are two standard grounds offered for this lack of correlation. One is the positional nature of many goods in market society – that they are goods, like status goods, whose value to the individual is affected by their availability and possession by others. Insofar as goods and income are valued comparatively by reference to the goods and incomes possessed by others, increasing overall consumption will not increase reported well-being (Hirsch 1977). The second is ‘hedonic adaptation’ (Frederick & Loewenstein 1999), that is the tendency for individuals to adjust to changes in their life situation and to return to previous levels of self-reported experienced well-being.

While changes in circumstances can result in a short-term shift in subjective wellbeing, over a period, individuals adjust and shift to a prior reference point. Both positional goods and adaptation result in a hedonic treadmill: beyond a certain level of consumption and income, as absolute, as opposed to relative, levels of income increase there is no corresponding increase in subjective wellbeing. Overall life-satisfaction remains stable: “Even though rising income means people can have more goods, the favourable effect of this on welfare is erased by the fact that people want more as they progress” (Easterlin 2001, 481).

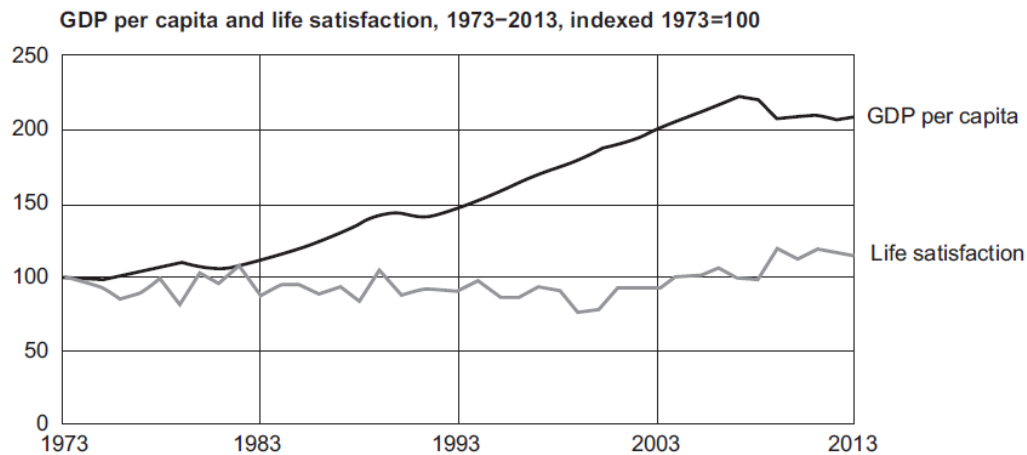


Figure 11.1 Well-being: Measuring ‘what matters’. From McKinnon 2014

This treadmill effect appears to make the hedonic approach to well-being particularly promising for critics of growth. Well-being can be improved if individuals are taken off the hedonic treadmill to which material consumption is subject and our collective choices as a society are refocused on other goods that are positively correlated with life-satisfaction and which do not require ever increasing GDP as a condition of their existence: familial and social relationships, secure and intrinsically worthwhile work, health, personal and political freedoms. It might indeed be thought that findings of hedonic psychology confirm the claim of the classic founders of hedonism, in particular of Epicurus, that the desire for wealth without limits is founded upon error – the wealth required for hedonic happiness is limited: “Natural wealth is both limited and easy to acquire. But wealth [as defined by] groundless opinions extends without limits” (Epicurus 1988, XV).

The environmental story around subjective well-being is understandably influential. However, while some of the underlying arguments that are independent of a subjective theory of well-being are important, in particular those concerning positional goods, the appeal to subjective well-being is one that should be resisted as an argument for showing that well-being and growth can be decoupled. An initial point to notice is that the concept of subjective well-being is ambiguous: it can refer to the content of well-being – well-being consists in being in the appropriate subjective states, e.g. in classical hedonism, pleasure and the absence of pain; it can refer to the evaluation of well-being – the use of individual self-reports to estimate levels of well-being (O’Neill 1998, ch.3). Life satisfaction surveys are subjective in the evaluation of well-being. It does not follow that they are surveys of subjective states. They are neutral as to the content of well-being. If you ask someone how satisfied they are with their lives, you are not necessarily asking them about their recent subjective states rather than other constituents of their lives that matter to them. This may include their psychological states but also directly other objective dimensions of their lives, such as family, friendships and work. A life-satisfaction survey is about subjective well-being understood as a subjective evaluation of well-being. It is not directly an assessment of the content of well-being understood as subjective states.

Both subjective evaluation and subjective content are open to problems of adaptation. A central problem with subjective assessments of well-being is that different individuals in different contexts will appeal to different standards and expectations of what counts as a good life. It raises problems of adaptive preferences – that one way to deal with adverse situations is to shift expectations downwards (Sen 1992, 55). The problem is apparent in the relationships between austerity and well-being. Look again at Figure 11.1. A point to note is that as far as life-satisfaction is concerned austerity has had little impact at all. As the Office of National Statistics notes in its report on the quality of life in the UK:

The recession has led to a higher proportion who are unemployed, with a particular impact on the young, and in 2009/10 more than 1 in 8 (12.3%) of us were finding it quite or very difficult to manage financially. Life satisfaction presents a more resilient picture, having remained broadly stable throughout the last decade. (Self, Thomas & Randall 2012, 2)

While the young and those on low incomes are particularly badly affected by austerity, including on objective measures of psychological well-being such as rates of anxiety and depression, this has not led to decreased life-satisfaction. There is good evidence that the lack of relationship between reported life satisfaction and austerity is a matter of adaptive preferences. They are a result of a shift in the aspirations of those most affected:

[H]ard economic times did enter into people's practical reasoning about what constitutes a good life: during hard times there was widespread re-specification of ends in accordance with subsistence goals such as security, stability and certainty, with effects concentrated among those living in low-income households, and the formative generation. This adaptation represents a move away from higher human potential goals, and a diminishment of internal capability. The combination of constrained external circumstances and diminished internal capability amounts to a double setback for the combined capabilities of these groups. (Austin 2016, 240)

In this context subjective well-being measures are simply not picking up the losses in well-being. Indeed one might say that the real social problem in this context is the absence of appropriate dissatisfaction which can drive social change.

The problem of adaptation also raises problems for intergenerational justice. Given adaptation, those in the future who suffer the adverse consequences of current decisions and practices may not experience them as adverse. A biologically impoverished world may lack many species of flora and fauna that we experience today, but their loss may no longer be experienced as a loss but simply as a background condition of life. A world geo-engineered through the release of sulphur particles into the upper atmosphere may lack blue skies, but for generations brought up in their absence this absence may not be experienced as such. A subjective well-being metric will fail to capture the wrongs done to future generations. An adequate account of the harms done to future generations requires reference to an objective state account of well-being (Gough 2015).

If the argument from well-being for degrowth is to avoid problems of adaptive preferences it needs to appeal to more objective metrics of human well-being. The concept of 'objective well-being' like 'subjective well-being' is ambiguous. It can refer to either objectivity in the content of well-being or objectivity in the evaluation of well-being (O'Neill 1998, ch.3). Approaches that are objective in content include those that appeal to needs (Wiggins 1998, 2006; Doyal & Gough 1991; O'Neill 2010) and those that appeal to capabilities and

functionings (Sen 1993, 1995; Nussbaum 2000; Jackson 2009; Muraca 2012). Both needs and capabilities are open to both subjective evaluation, for example through self-reported health, and objective evaluation, for example through morbidity and life expectancy measures. On objective content theories what matters to well-being are not just psychological states, but what people can do or be in their lives. Such accounts will be multi-dimensional, given the variety of different constituents of a good life. To live well is to have or realise a variety of states – particular forms of social relations, physical health, autonomy, knowledge of the world, aesthetic experience, accomplishment and achievement, pleasures, a well-constituted relation with the non-human world and so on.

The claim that there are limits required for a good life understood in this objective sense is also an old one: the number of goods which “suffices for a good life is not unlimited” (Aristotle 1948, book 1, ch.8). Just as the Epicurean case for the existence of limits to the good life has seen a revival, so also has the Aristotelian case. However, making it good requires a detailed analysis of the different constituents of the good life – material, social and cultural – and of what is required for their realisation. Critics of growth are required to move away from the simple appeal to the Easterlin paradox – there is no simple Easterlin paradox for objective evaluations of well-being – and onto much more difficult territory of objective measures and indicators of well-being. This includes standard indicators of poverty reduction, life expectancy, morbidity rates, literacy rates (Steinberger & Roberts 2010) and consideration of the social conditions in which relationships of community and social practices that are constitutive condition of the good life can thrive.

Gross national happiness: capabilities, needs and the politics of well-being

Specifying the goods that are constitutive of a good life brings its own politics. The problems are evident in the multidimensional approach to measuring well-being that has been particularly popular amongst environmentalists, gross national happiness (GNH) of Bhutan. In critical discussions of growth the metric of gross national happiness (GNH) of Bhutan is often cited as an alternative metric to GDP (Daly & Farley 2010, 274; Costanza et al. 2014). The measure takes a multi-dimensional approach to well-being that is “not focused only on subjective well-being to the exclusion of other dimensions” (Ura et al. 2012, 7). It includes both objective and subjective measures of well-being and both subjective and objective dimensions of the content of well-being. It is also explicitly social: “it internalises responsibility and other-regarding motivations explicitly” (Ura et al. 2012, 7). The gross national happiness index covers nine domains each with weighted indicators:

- 1 Psychological well-being (Life-satisfaction 33%, Positive emotions 17%, Negative emotions 17% Spirituality 33%);
- 2 Health (Self-reported health 10%, Healthy days 30%, Disability 30%, Mental health 30%);
- 3 Time use (Work 50%, Sleep 50%);
- 4 Education (Literacy 30%, Schooling 30%, Knowledge 20%, Value 20%);
- 5 Cultural diversity and resilience (*Zorig chusum* skills (artistic skills) 30%, Cultural participation 30%, Speak native language 20%, *Driglam Namzha* (the Way of Harmony) 20%);
- 6 Good governance (Political participation 40%, Services 40%, Governance performance 10%, Fundamental rights 10%);

7 Community vitality (Donation of time & money 30%, Safety 30%, Community relationship 20%, Family 20%);

8 Ecological diversity and resilience (Wildlife damage 40%, Urban issues 40%, Responsibility towards environment 10%, Ecological issues 10%);

9 Living standards (Per capita income 33%, Assets 33%, Housing 33%)

(Ura et al. 2012, 26).

With the explicit inclusion of cultural diversity, ecological diversity and community relationships, GNH has been taken as a model for measuring human well-being by many environmental critics of growth.

While this multi-dimensional approach to well-being is one that has real virtues, what is absent from the idealisation of GNH is an appreciation of the politics that underpins some of the goods that appear on the list. GNH puts great emphasis on the cultural dimensions of well-being and in particular its appeal to 'cultural diversity' and the maintenance of Bhutan's distinctive culture:

The distinctive culture of Bhutan facilitates sovereignty of the country and provides identity to the people. Hence the preservation and promotion of culture has been accorded a high priority both by the government and the people . . . The diversity of the culture is manifested in forms of language, traditional arts and crafts, festivals, events, ceremonies, drama, music, dress and etiquette and more importantly the spiritual values that people share . . . To assess the strength of various aspects of culture, four indicators have been considered: language, artisan skills, cultural participation and *Driglam Namzha* (the Way of Harmony). (Ura et al. 2012, 144).

The maintenance of a distinctive culture is taken to be important in the context of Bhutan's being surrounded by larger more populous countries. The concept of *Driglam Namzha* is particularly prominent: "*Driglam Namzha* (the Way of Harmony) is expected behaviour (of consuming, clothing, moving) especially in formal occasions and in formal spaces" (Ura et al. 2012, 148).

The centrality of this cultural dimension has a strong political dimension. It has to be understood against the background of the Bhutanisation policy pursued by the government in relation to the Nepalese Lhotshampa population in southern Bhutan (Hutt 2003, ch.11). The 1985 Citizenship Act denied citizenship rights to those who could not show residence in Bhutan prior to 1958 (Hutt 2003, ch.10; Sharma & Sharma 1998, 251–252). Following this law and a 1988 census, a large portion of the ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan were reclassified as illegal immigrants. A 'one nation, one people policy' introduced in the sixth Five-Year Plan (1987–92) enforced the cultural practice of *Driglam Namzha* as a way of preserving Bhutanese national culture (Hutt 2003 , 164–173). Nepalese was discontinued as a language in schools in 1989. Following political repression, by 1992, more than 80,000 Nepalese Lhotshampas had left Bhutan and ended up in refugee camps in eastern Nepal (Amnesty International 1992; Human Rights Watch 2007a). It is against this background that the commitment to 'cultural diversity' and priority accorded to 'the preservation and promotion of culture' need to be understood. In this context the demand for happiness can take a particularly ironic turn:

The army sent us the form issued by the government [voluntary migration form].

They said that we had to go out. They said if you go now you will get some money.

Some people got a little money. On the way [as we left Bhutan] there were many

police. We were forced to sign the document. They snapped our photos. The man told me to smile, to show my teeth. He wanted to show that I was leaving my country willingly, happily, that I was not forced to leave (Refugee testimony Human Rights Watch 2007b, 16. See also the testimonies in Sharma & Sharma 1998, 257–267)

The cultural dimensions of policy of gross national happiness have a particular political content.

To make these observations is not to reject the importance of multi-dimensional approaches to well-being. However, it is to insist that any such exercises need to be understood in their wider political context. In particular, there is a recurrent danger in radical politics to see utopias in exotic places elsewhere, a kind of radical tourist perspective, in this context in an imaginary Shangri La which is very different from the actual place of conflicts and suffering it disguises (Hutt 2003; Pellegrini & Tasciotti 2014).

There are, as I noted in the first half of this paper, good grounds for criticism of limitless economic growth. However, critics need to avoid easy but problematic arguments against growth. Simple appeals to subjective theories of well-being and the Easterlin paradox fail to provide a robust case against growth. Arguments need rather to focus on the conditions for meeting human needs and functionings. However, those arguments in turn need to be placed in the context of the larger social and political context in which deliberation on the constituents of the good life take place.

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