Enlightenment or a Catastrophic Wrong Turn – could it have been otherwise?

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Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo were both economists. They knew and debated with each other. Both lived during the age of enlightenment, Malthus from 1766 until 1834 and Ricardo from 1772 until 1823. Both knew Adam Smith (1723 – 1790). The enlightenment, and the intellectual powerhouse of the Scottish enlightenment especially was a period of seminal economic as well as philosophical thought that has profoundly shaped the world we live in today. In that world we see the continued growth of our economies as essential to our very existence, let alone our wellbeing. I do not want to oversimplify things by setting up a false binary in which Malthus takes all the credit for realising that infinite growth cannot logically be possible. By the same token, I do not want to demonise Ricardo for the kind of thinking that has led to the cornucopian belief that science and its handmaiden technology can always fix things sufficiently for growth to continue.[1] Nevertheless, as that very same science tells us we have already overshot the capacity for growth we do have some questions to ask of economists. Perhaps economists are the problem?

What exactly is an economist? Many of today's living economists like to think they are scientists. Let us be quite clear about this. They are not. If they were, the great financial crash of 2008 may not have happened.[2] If it is a science at all, economics is a social science. That means that it does not belong amongst those disciplines that describe and analyse the physical world as it is through the verification or refutation of hypotheses developed through the dispassionate analysis of objective data obtained by measurement. Apologists for economists like to stress how market behaviours are analysed through randomised field trials, how economists make extensive use of advanced statistics and econometrics to link empirical observations to established theories, but their measurements are not of physical laws that exist outside human societies. They are of social norms and fickle human behaviours. When economists cite

from what they believe to be an internally coherent body of incrementally gained knowledge they are referring not to something derived from hard science but from *values*. Values that are the subjective beliefs of human beings, values that are their reasons for action.

Social science is recognised by most of its practitioners as not being value-free[3] but it does have standards and conventions that render it above polemic, opinion or politics. Most social science recognises, acknowledges and attempts to control for the shortcomings of qualitative rather than quantitative observation through methodological transparency regarding the subjective role of the observer. An inflated view held by some economics discards these as "soft" and "unscientific". I should know this because I chose an econometric methodology for my own PhD and have subsequently devoted much time and effort to recognising its limitations, as in my essays "*What would you pay me for a beautiful sunset*?"[a] and "*Are intrinsic values real*?".[b]

The anticipatory defence I gave for econometrics back in 1998 was "although substantial critiques of environmental economics exist, a core aim of the thesis is to demonstrate that econometric technique can be potentially a very powerful form of social criticism".[4] *Social criticism*. My attempt at quantification of the values held by the millennials (or at least the sample of millennials involved in my research when they were children) has been vindicated by the fact that an insufficient number of millennials support policies that stand a chance of mitigating climate change even though they have grown up during an era when the need for mitigation has been increasingly widely publicised. That is the social criticism I make.

There could hardly be a stronger confirmation that economics is driven by values and not science than the far-reaching influence of the two enlightenment economists living at the same time who played such a significant part in the evolution of our present position. It is important not to exaggerate the extent of their disagreements. Whilst Malthus is often credited with the important idea that exponential growth cannot continue indefinitely in a finite world, both were fundamentally in tune with the ideas of Adam Smith. Both supported the principle of the market and the importance of profit. Both were worried about the slowing of economic growth and the constraints that could result from shortage of resources, particularly productive agricultural land. The key difference of opinion was over how market forces could sustain growth.

That difference is still seen today as a difference between neoliberals and those who hold to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Both (aside from the far right) have some recognition of the need for sustainability. The ideological quarrel is between the Keynesian inheritors of Malthus's views on growth and the neoliberal inheritors of

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[a] Scroll to the bottom of my web page on overshoot. Overshoot | Martin Ashley

[b] Ibid Values and Actions | Martin Ashley

Ricardo's views on growth. Should there be centralised planning and economic direction or will well-functioning markets eventually bring about sustainability? Science cannot answer this question. but it can tell us, indeed has already told us, that we do not have enough time to let these arguments run their course. For one thing, they probably will never run their course because they are not scientific arguments. To a degree they are value judgements, but even more fundamentally they are judgments that derive from faith.[c]

There is an argument that science itself is implicated in overshoot because it has enabled huge leaps forwards in agricultural productivity that Malthus did not foresee and it is a valid one. The ideal of complete rationality even were it possible has long been corrupted by politics which gets to choose which science is listened to and, as has become painfully apparent on the other side of the Atlantic recently, which science is funded. So, if we are really to avoid taking yet another catastrophic wrong turn, we need to confront what it is about human nature that gives rise to politics in the first place. The same question might also be asked of faith. Faith can lead people in quite opposite directions and organised religion has not exactly been without its own cruelly violent politics over the last two thousand or so years.

We would probably recognise Adam Smith as the key progenitor of faith in the market. Thatcher certainly did. What were the grounds for his faith? Unsurprisingly, he had more substantial grounds than fables of stone tablets on mountains. The enlightenment did not invent economics. Smith observed that pre-enlightenment economics were not very good economics. They were dominated by central governments which awarded favours and monopolies to a privileged few and imposed multiple restrictions on trade. It was a system known as mercantilism and Smith made the value judgement that all other than the very wealthy were disadvantaged by such a system. If this sounds to modern ears like a left of centre position, it perhaps tells something about conditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Thinkers of the Scottish enlightenment were at the time the world leaders in the nascent practice of observation and reason and had been much encouraged by the successes of Newton in hard physical science. In that sense, Smith was a progenitor of the present-day belief that economics is a science. He was himself influenced by another eminent thinker of the Scottish enlightenment, David Hume (1711 – 1776). Hume held a positive view of commerce quite in opposition to the dominance of autocratic rulers, theologians and those who saw trade as morally corrupting. He saw peaceful relations emerging from trade and the absence of regulation leading to universal human flourishing. Today, we

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[c] I can think of one scientific writer on evolution who might have something to say about pinning the future of the Alpha generation and its successors upon the faith of boomers, millennials and their predecessors back to the time of the enlightenment.

know that sometimes they do and sometimes they do not, and for all our advances, even in artificial intelligence, we live in a world where autocratic rulers still vie for power with those who struggle to maintain democracy.

Arguably the root cause of our considerable difficulties is that science, even now with huge advances psychology, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary biology cannot solve the problem of what we call "human nature". A convincing reason for this was given by Daniel Helminiak in 1998. The competence of science is limited to what "is", leaving the vast and problematic realm of what "ought to be" to philosophy.[5] Where does economics sit in this? From powered flight to artificially intelligent domestic robots, measurements of what "is" have resulted in progress undreamed of in the eighteenth century. Meanwhile many philosophers have come and gone since the enlightenment but the problem of what "ought to be" seems no nearer a solution. Economics cannot achieve for us the state of living in the nirvana of what ought to be for nobody *knows* what that is. This knowledge, so vital to all our futures, is apparently beyond the competence of science.

In the absence of this knowledge, most economists blunder on with their blind faith in growth. There could be no stronger proof that economics is an unscientific, value driven enterprise than the fact that no economist has yet been able to explain why growth is so necessary. Some will say that growth is the best means we have of holding conflicts over resources in check. Others will argue that the capitalism which does appear in so many ways to have been more successful that the failed communist alternative is impossible without it. Yet others will argue that growth has reduced poverty in the past, is essential to reducing it in the future and ultimately allowing the entire population of the world, no matter how much it might grow, to enjoy a decent basic living standard. Towards the left end of the political spectrum there are economists who support growth provided it is *green* growth that develops sustainable technologies and even places a monetary value on the services freely provided by nature but plundered by those towards the right.

None of them can offer a scientific proof for whatever are the beliefs so fundamental to their adopted faith, which is why we are where we are and why we're going inexorably where our predicament, the predicament of "human nature", takes us. It is a brave person who stands up and argues for an alternative world where there is no growth but if the arguments of this essay are accepted and we are not to fall into live-for-the present fatalism (a ploy of the right) we may need to accept the need seriously to evaluate the no-growth alternative, and to do so with some urgency.

Boat of Garten
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[1] Shaw, S., Flemming, S., McSorley, G., Kujundzic, N. (2026) Reverse Adaptation for Sustainability: Highlighting the need for a shift in philosophy of engineering design education to advance a sustainable future, *Conference Proceedings of the Canadian Engineering Education Association*.

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/11/nobel-prize-economics-not-science-hubris-disaster

[3] Black, D. (2013) On the almost inconceivable misunderstandings concerning the subject of value-free social science, *The British Journal of Sociology,* 64(4): 743 – 780.

[4] Ashley, M. (1998) Value as a Reason for Action in Environmental Education, unpublished PhD tehesis, University of the West of England, Bristol, Page 109.

[5] Helminiak, D. (1998) *Religion and the Human Sciences: an approach via spirituality*. Abany: State University of New York Press.