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Beyond the Dismal Science: Pursuing the Good Life Within an Environmental Framework

Soren J. Dudley

Macalester College, sorendudley@gmail.com

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Beyond the Dismal Science:
Pursuing the Good Life Within an Environmental
Framework

Soren Dudley

Advised by David Blaney

Political Science

April 26th, 2016

For my brother, Joseph

Abstract

Neoclassical economic theory dominates the ways in which we frame our problems, our policies, and our behavior. I argue this neoclassical framing presents deeply flawed understandings of human motivations and wellbeing. I further contend that by relying on the metrics and practices of neoclassical economics, we actively impede our pursuit of the good life. The same economic theories that misguide the pursuit of wellbeing are also destructive to the ways in which we approach the problems of climate change. By drawing on a robust body of literature, I establish my own understanding of wellbeing and show that the pillars of this wellbeing align with the central goals of environmentalism. I ultimately argue that the framework of environmentalism offers us an opportunity to turn away from inherently destructive neoclassical practices and reshape our conception and pursuit of the good life.

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Preface

In my economics courses at Macalester, we begin every model by laying out certain assumptions about society and human behavior. We acknowledge that these assumptions exist for the sake of simplicity, and allow us to get at the meat of the problem. But as I have immersed myself not only in economics but in studies of political theory as well, the assumptions underlying neoclassical economics have started to seem less benign. I have come to see neoclassical priorities and assumptions as coded political messages that are deeply engrained in the ways we conceive of ourselves, our lives, and the things we find meaningful.

Even as I have become more skeptical of neoclassical theory, I have simultaneously become convinced that living a good life is deeply intertwined with environmental goals. This is not simply because we gain utility from breathing clean air or seeing flowers, but because environmentalism challenges us to reshape our behaviors and societies, and live in ways that better express our priorities. Yet the ways in which neoclassical economics frames the issues of environmentalism and wellbeing alienates these two pursuits from each other because it can only frame goods or virtues as instrumental, and can never fully articulate the inherent worthiness of environmentalism or of a good life.

This study has been an opportunity to settle a long-standing internal contention that has marked my intellectual efforts. With it, I aim to understand what aspects of life are inherently valuable, articulate the ways in which neoclassicism threatens these aspects of life, and offer of a more honest, robust, and well-considered framing of the good life and environmentalism.

In completing this project, I am grateful to my parents, Matthew and Ellen Dudley, for keeping me grounded and focused when the work seemed overwhelming. I would also like to thank my readers, Roopali Phadke and Morgan Adamson, for the valuable perspectives they have offered regarding my work. I am especially thankful to my peers, Rothin Datta and Reavey Alcott Fike, for their much-needed compassion, commentary, and commiseration. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my advisor, David Blaney; his generosity with both his time and effort, his incisive understanding of the literature, and his thoughtful engagement with my work made this project possible.

Introduction

Neoclassical economic theory dominates the ways in which we frame our problems, our policies, and our behavior. This neoclassical framing disregards the diversity of virtues and hardships that characterize human life by treating all values as commensurable, ignores the social contexts in which values and choices arise, does not acknowledge the self-awareness and sensitivity of its own human subject, and makes central to its own practice pursuits that are only instrumentally valuable, or hollow of value entirely. These weaknesses make themselves known in the use of utility as a measure of value, and, subsequently, in revealed preference theory. Neoclassicism further limits itself with its assumptions of scarcity and its privileging of growth and the accumulation of wealth as a proxy for all other goods. Not only do these limitations severely hamper neoclassical economics' ability to inform decisions, understand human behavior, and guide political activity; these limitations actively impede our ability to define and pursue good lives. In the same way that neoclassicism distorts its subject's understanding of herself and her wellbeing, neoclassicism distorts the true project of environmentalism by mischaracterizing environmentalist goals and the tradeoffs that they imply. Conversely, environmentalism offers a powerful opportunity to reexamine what is truly worthy in life and to restructure our societies and institutions so that they better advance the pursuit of the good life.

In the following, I draw on a wide and varied body of literature comprised of political philosophy, social theory, economic thought, and environmentally focused texts written for a popular audience. Using this eclectic collection, I critique the underlying assumptions of neoclassical theory and establish an alternative understanding of

wellbeing. This reconstituted conception of the good life is based in an exploration of nine basic goods: *health, security, harmony with nature, the capacity to pursue life projects, friendship, community, leisure, democratic rights, and dignity*. I go on to posit that environmentalism in its most fundamental form is an effort to change human behaviors and social organizations so that they more truthfully reflect aspects of a good life. Environmentalism, therefore, is inextricably linked to any sincere pursuit of human wellbeing, not just because the health and security of our environments is necessary for the health and security of human life but also because environmentalism challenges us to reimagine ourselves outside of the narrow and destructive prescriptions of neoclassical economics.

In Section I of this paper I lay out the salient pillars of neoclassical economics using William Stanley Jevons as my guide. Specifically, I focus on the neoclassical understanding of value, its utilitarian roots, its reliance on a binary metric of human wellbeing, and its emphasis on personal preference and willingness to pay as a marker of wellbeing involving pain and pleasure. I draw on Jevons because of his useful position within economic history. His work is early enough that he explicitly draws on utilitarian thought of the day – later neoclassicists do not often explicitly reference these social theorist roots. Jevons’ work therefore offers us an opportunity to treat neoclassical economic assumptions not as empirical truths or necessary conveniences but as biased postulates grounded in specific philosophies. Jevons’ work is also useful because although it represents neoclassicism’s roots in social theory, it also resonates quite clearly with mainstream economics of today, allowing us an inroad by which to understand the basic assumptions and teachings of contemporary theory.

Section II is a critique of neoclassical economic thought, specifically focusing on the posited understanding of value, the binary metric of goodness and wellbeing, preference theory, and the treatment of wealth. In this critique I draw on the work of Amartya Sen, Robert and Edward Skidelsky, Charles Taylor, and David Levine. I take issue with neoclassicism's disregard for the individual's self awareness and her commitment to different and sometimes competing ideals, its ignorance of human motivations and values, and its use of one universalizing metric to compare and equate the diverse aspects of human functioning. In this section I argue that the neoclassical portrait of the human being is both restrictive and abstract, and that representing the individual in the way that neoclassical theory does is not only incorrect but damaging to the modern individual and her ability to pursue a good life.

In Section III I offer my understanding of what the good life *is* – to do so I again draw on Sen, Taylor, Levine, and Skidelsky and Skidelsky in addition to Angus Deaton. As each thinker expresses, there is no one ultimate “good” but rather diverse virtues that cannot be thought of as commensurable or summable. Further, the thinkers agree that the pursuit of these diverse virtues is itself virtuous and valuable. With this in mind I lay out the criteria for the basic goods that comprise a good life and then offer a comprehensive description of each of the basic goods listed above.

Section IV, the final section of my paper, draws together my critique of neoclassicism, my portrait of the good life, and the goals of environmentalism. I argue that environmentalism in its purest and most simple form is the altering of human behavior to better reflect and pursue human wellbeing. Environmentalism, then, offers us an opportunity to reprioritize our goals and re-define our sense of what is good and

worthwhile. Further, just as neoclassical economics is damaging to the individual's ability to define herself and her conception of wellbeing, it is damaging to environmentalism's intrinsic value and fundamental project. I therefore argue that by challenging neoclassical theory, we reframe the sets of trade-off with which we are presented and re-examine the valuable parts of our lives. In so doing we empower the entwined pursuits of environmentalism and a good life.

I: Jevons and Utilitarianism in Neoclassical Economics

In order to posit alternatives to neoclassical conceptions of wellbeing, it is imperative that we first understand the foundations of neoclassical thought. To this end I use William Stanley Jevons' work *The Theory of Political Economy*, published in 1871, as a touchstone to both understand and critique the foundations of neoclassicism. As one of the foundational thinkers of early neoclassical economics, Jevons offers a solid and holistic base for understanding the core assumptions of neoclassical economic thought.

In the following section I lay out Jevons' understanding of the origin of value, his description of pleasure and pain as metrics for human functioning, his contribution to the foundations of revealed preference theory, and his treatment of nations and societies. Throughout, I highlight Jevons' use of utilitarian reasoning. I conclude this section by discussing the internal inconsistencies I find within the work and show directions for criticism. Specifically, I challenge Jevons' treatment of nations and societies as aggregations of individuals, with no concern for the social context or cultural pressures that surround choices. I draw attention to Jevons' attempt to both provide a neutral and truthful portrait of the human subject while explicitly abdicating the task of examining human feeling outside pleasure and pain. By noting this tension, I illustrate the limitations of utilitarian metrics of human wellbeing. Finally, I note the inconsistency of treating wealth as the assumed fundamental pursuit of human activity while simultaneously claiming that wealth is only a proxy for the inherently valuable pursuit of pleasure, which itself is presented as a generalization of all forms of goodness in a human life. By drawing attention to these points of weakness in Jevons' arguments I establish the grounds for a more thorough critique of Jevons and neoclassicism in Section II.

Yet how significant is a critique of neoclassical economics in a discussion of wellbeing? How much does economic theory really affect our understandings of ourselves and the framing of the policy that shapes our political and social lives? I argue that the influences of neoclassical economics are not restricted to specific aspects of politics and academia; rather, the postulates of neoclassicism have a hegemonic hold on the framing of policy and the conception of human behavior in contemporary western society. This claim reflects the arguments of Michel Foucault in his collection of lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*, wherein he contends that neoliberalism constitutes the market as a site of veridiction in the political economy.¹ Thus in contemporary society, the modern individual is judged, condemned, redeemed, and therefore understood in the seemingly objective eye of the market. To offer a handful of concrete or pedestrian examples to fix the point would be to understate the momentous influence of this mode of thinking.

But in a critique of neoclassical economics, why turn to the work of Jevons? Entire branches of economic thought have emerged since his time, statistical methodology has evolved greatly, and theoretical insights have made vast strides in broadening and deepening the field of neoclassical economics. Surely the entire field cannot be critiqued based on the work of one foundational thinker. This I readily concede, yet I still contend that Jevons' work sketches out the foundational assumptions that continue to dominate mainstream economics, and that the limitations I address in Jevons' arguments are present in contemporary economic thought. To illustrate this, I offer citations from Gregory Mankiw's popular textbook *Principles of Economics* alongside Jevons' arguments. Mankiw's reiteration of Jevons' assertions shows that

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picadore, 2008), 33.

Jevons' conceptions of value, utility, and preference ordering remain relevant to any discussion of neoclassicism. Further, Jevons does the important work of translating utilitarianism into economics by drawing on the work of Jeremy Bentham. Looking at this original translation of the arguments of Bentham into formal economic theory makes the assumptions and social theory underpinnings of neoclassical economics easier to see.

The work of Jevons and his contemporaries caused a foundational shift in the way economists view value. Classical economists and their critics contend that the value of an object is derived from the labor hours required to produce that object. Most famously, Adam Smith and Karl Marx build their work on this conception of value. In this tradition labor hours – the chosen unit of labor – are also the chosen unit of value because each object is the physical manifestation of the hours it took to make it, and therefore any value that can be assigned to the object emerges because of the hours spent to produce it.² This standard by which value is measured is objective. Jevons' work marks a departure: he argues that an object's value comes from how useful it is to the person who consumes it, and that labor hours only contribute to value “by varying the degree of utility of the commodity through an increase or limitation of supply.”³ For Jevons, and for neoclassical economists, value is measured by a subjective standard rather than an objective one.

Not only is value not tied to labor time, it is also not tied to any inherent quality of the object itself. According to the neoclassical school, the usefulness of a thing is entirely a function of the consumer's evaluation of its benefits. “Utility,” Jevons writes, “though a

² On labor theory of value, see Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into The Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* (New York: The Modern Library, 1776), 47, and Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1867), 145.

³ W. Stanley Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1871), 1.2.

quality of things, is *no inherent quality*.”⁴ Jevons means by this that objects are not useful outside of human consumption, and their usefulness is not tied in any way to an inherent aspect of the object. An object’s utility, which here means usefulness, is entirely quantitative in that it either adds to a person’s wellbeing through their use of it or it does not. In simple terms, as Mankiw writes, “utility is an abstract measure of the satisfaction or happiness that a consumer receives from a bundle of goods.”⁵ I say that it is *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* because there is no acknowledgement of the circumstances surrounding the object, the end to which it was used, the particular kind of wellbeing that its use affords the consumer, or any number of contextual and qualitative details that might contribute to our understanding of the relationship between object and consumer. In Jevons’ view of value, we are concerned only with the magnitude of the object’s effect on the consumer, and whether the effect is positive or negative – in the vernacular of economics, whether it creates utility or disutility. We may therefore say that value in the neoclassical tradition is both subjective and quantitative, or, as Mankiw puts it, utility is “a person’s subjective measure of wellbeing or satisfaction.”⁶

This binary measure of value – an object’s utility or disutility – is explicitly derived from, and utterly analogous to, the utilitarian measurement of the human range of emotion and wellbeing as increments of either pleasure or pain. Just as an object gives a certain magnitude and intensity of utility or disutility to its consumer, each individual’s emotional state at any time can be understood as a certain magnitude and intensity of either pleasure or pain. So overlapping are these two ideas that they share vocabulary

⁴ Jevons, 3.13.

⁵ N. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Economics, 6th Edition* (Mason: South Western Cengage Learning, 2012), 447.

⁶ Mankiw, 581.

within the utilitarian tradition – utility means both the usefulness of an object and the pleasure of an individual, while disutility means both the “un-usefulness” of an object and the pain of an individual.

Jevons embraces this utilitarian conception of human functioning, and uses it as the foundation of his economics. He writes, “the theory which follows is entirely based on a calculus of pleasure and pain; and the object of Economics is to maximise happiness by purchasing pleasure, as it were, at the lowest cost of pain.”⁷ If we accept that that people are fundamentally motivated by pleasure and pain in all regards, then it follows that if someone does something of her own will, this activity must have in some way added to her pleasure or reduced her pain. Identically, if a person pays for something it is evident that that thing, no matter what it was, gives her a utility equal to or greater than the amount she paid. Though Jevons does not state the theory of revealed preferences in explicit terms, we see its roots in his writing and in the pillars of utilitarianism. Mankiw echoes this understanding of value and willingness to pay in his discussion of consumer utility maximization.⁸

Utilitarianism, and by extension neoclassical thought, establishes utility and disutility as the fundamental expression of human functioning. All emotional states can be boiled down to a net magnitude and intensity of either pain or pleasure. Anxiety, fear, anger, jealousy, hunger, exhaustion, sexual frustration, boredom, and so on are all classed as “pain,” while safety, security, sexual release, satisfaction, camaraderie, fulfillment of duty, excitement, relaxation, and so on are all, at base, differing magnitudes and intensities of “pleasure.” If pain and pleasure encompass the totality of human experience

⁷ Jevons, 1.29.

⁸ Mankiw, 136.

it follows, as Jevons claims, that the goal of human experience is to maximize pleasure at the cost of minimum pain. “I have,” he writes, “no hesitation in accepting the Utilitarian theory of morals which does uphold the effect upon the happiness of mankind as the criterion of what is right and wrong.”⁹ The greatest good is pleasure, and the greatest bad is pain. This understanding of good and bad, whether applied to human wellbeing in utilitarianism or a measure of value in neoclassicism, is rooted in individual wants, needs, and priorities. In this polar arrangement of human functioning, goodness, like value, is an individual and subjective experience.

These measures of value and goodness, as individual assessments of personal experience, are dependent on the assumption that individuals are discreet, whole, and self-contained.¹⁰ Because individuals are seen as self-contained, society is not treated as anything greater than the sum of its most basic component – the discreet individual. Society as a unit is analogous to the individual as a unit. As an aggregation of separate individuals, society can be represented by the mathematical expression $n(\textit{individual})$ where n is the number of individuals considered. Utilitarianism and neoclassicism are therefore able to apply their reasoning about individual functioning and wellbeing to nations, markets, and humanity as a whole without qualms. As Jevons argues, “though the theory presumes to investigate the condition of a mind, and bases upon this investigation the whole of Economics, practically it is an aggregate of individuals which will be treated. The general forms of the laws of Economics are the same in the case of

⁹ Jevons, 1.29.

¹⁰ These measures are also dependent on the assumption that individuals understand their own wants, needs, and desires fully. This is part of the assumption of humans being “rational,” which is a starting point for many models. See Mankiw, 480.

individuals and nations.”¹¹ If the individual is at base guided by the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, then humanity’s highest law is the pursuit of maximum net pleasure. If the purpose of individual consumption is the amassing of more and more utility, then all markets and all nations should be organized to accommodate this goal.

Such a treatment of societies and nations does not consider the interplay between individuals’ choices and lifestyles, does not factor in the cultural pressures and mores surrounding wellbeing, does not make any concession that human behavior is made meaningful by societal context and that society is therefore more complex and more interdependent than an aggregation of self-contained individuals.

The emergence of welfare economics as a distinct branch of study might stand as evidence that this portrait of society has changed since Jevons’ writing. Welfare economics seeks to maximize social utility given a specific welfare function and to this end relies on much more complex models of society. Welfare economics does not explicitly restrict itself to the binary of pleasure and pain, and may seek to maximize any number of welfare indicators, including equity of resource distribution, economic freedom, and other such socially meaningful measures. Though the consideration of other welfare functions besides the maximization of aggregate utility marks a departure from Jevons’ work, welfare economics’ commitment to maximizing social utility, and the implied assertion that multiple and diverse virtues of human life can be equated, summed, and maximized still reflect the most fundamental assertions of Jevons and his contemporaries.

¹¹ Jevons, 1.21.

As we have seen, Jevons intentionally constructs his neoclassical theory on a foundation of utilitarian logic, drawing economic parallels to a body of ethical thought. In doing so he necessarily affirms certain philosophical assumptions about the nature of humanity. He protects himself and these specific philosophical assumptions against critiques in the section of his book entitled “Relation of Economics to Ethics.” He is especially careful to defend the classification of all human experiences and emotions as either pleasures or pains. Though he has no issue accepting that human happiness is the ultimate measure of right and wrong, he qualifies this by saying that he has “never felt that there is anything in that theory to prevent our putting the widest and highest interpretation upon the terms used.”¹² Quite simply, if we classify pain and pleasure loosely enough, all human functioning can be understood in these terms. Surely the robustness of a metric is questionable if it must be bent, stretched, and generalized in order to accommodate anything that might otherwise stand as its contradiction. Further, despite this caveat, Jevons still contends that human feeling can be arranged on a spectrum characterized above all by magnitude and direction (even if the spectrum itself is so loosely defined it almost loses meaning). Neoclassicism’s fundamental underlying metric, then, weakens itself by presuming too much about its own ability to accurately describe its subject.

Yet despite his commitment to this metric, in this section Jevons also writes of different rankings of human feeling, and humbly concedes, “it is the lowest rank of feelings which we here treat.”¹³ Though he seemingly acknowledges that his brand of economics can only offer one perspective on one sliver of man’s “feeling,” he later

¹² Jevons, 1.29.

¹³ Jevons, 1.35.

writes, “in the science of Economics we treat men not as they ought to be, but as they are.”¹⁴ To treat man as he is is to consider each of his dimensions – certainly such a claim must be backed by a rigorous, careful, and holistic treatment. Unfortunately for Jevons, one cannot contend that one’s field of study treats men “as they are” while simultaneously relinquishing responsibility for all but the “lowest rank of feelings.”

In another partial concession, Jevons argues that economics can offer instruction on human behavior “in the absence of other motives,” but that the moral direction of these behaviors is beyond the scope of economic calculation. He explains, “each labourer, in the absence of other motives, is supposed to devote his energy to the accumulation of wealth. A higher calculus of moral right and wrong would be needed to show how he may best employ that wealth for the good of others as well as himself.”¹⁵

This assertion begs several critiques. First, the assertion that a laborer is supposed to devote his energy to the accumulation of wealth should not be taken for granted, and by itself opens up whole avenues of criticism, which will be explored in the following. Second, it is hard if not impossible to imagine a situation in which an individual has no other motives besides wealth, which renders the recommendations of Jevons’ economics quite limited. Yet it is also hard to believe that economics does *not* make recommendations in the presence of other motives. In fact, Jevons claims over and over again that all motives can be boiled down to the avoidance of pleasure and pain, and goes on to build an entire economic theory on this claim. In fact, he argues that this theory can be used not only to understand the functioning of the individual but to build economic

¹⁴ Jevons, 3.2.

¹⁵ Jevons, 1.35.

laws for nations as well. Jevons offers his theories as guides for the structures of society, and therefore cannot fairly say that moral right and wrong are not his within his purview.

Jevons' inability to reconcile the assumptions of his work with their moral implications and imperatives reveals troubling internal inconsistencies. These inconsistencies beg further exploration and criticism of his work and of the school of thought that it represents.

II: Critiquing Jevons and Neoclassical Thought

Jevons' difficulties in reconciling his economic theories with larger moral issues hint at the problems with the neoclassical portrait of human functioning. I will develop my critique further by drawing on the work of David Levine, Charles Taylor, Amartya Sen, and Robert and Edward Skidelsky. In the following subsections, I offer four main critiques of neoclassicism, continuing to use Jevons' work as my point of departure. I first discuss Jevons' theory of the origin of value. I use Levine to argue that the subjective and individual contrivance of value offered by neoclassicism is incomplete and inaccurate because it ignores the network of individual choices and social pressures that create meaning and value. Second, I explore the limitations of understanding human functioning within a binary of pleasure and pain. To do so I draw on Taylor's theory of diverse goods, in which he posits that we cannot understand different virtues, values, and goods as commensurable or equivalent, and that to characterize human functioning in the way that neoclassicism does is to misstate the trade-offs that individuals face. Third, I critique revealed preference theory. In challenging this theory I draw on Sen's critique of the "rational" human on which revealed preference theory relies, paying special attention to his treatment of commitment to different ideals and his concept of meta-preferences. Finally, I challenge the treatment of wealth as the fundamental pursuit of the laborer. To do so I use the work of Skidelsky and Skidelsky, forwarding their argument that the subjective metric of utility necessarily creates insatiability and scarcity, and is essentially meaningless.

Levine on the Origin of Use Value

In his book, *Needs, Rights, and The Market*, David Levine points out that the utility-based understanding of value and the relationship between individual consumer and object is flawed if not downright nonsensical. As Levine says, we give meaning to an object's purpose by using it, but the ways in which we can use this object is also determined by the object's physical properties, as well as the social and cultural meanings surrounding the object.¹⁶ Take the example of a wooden chair. The user might sit on the chair to accomplish any number of seated tasks, stand on the chair to reach a high up place, burn the chair for heat, and so on – certainly the ways in which a chair can be used are numerous and varied, but each of these uses is dictated by the physical properties of the chair; we cannot eat the chair, drive the chair to work, or wear the chair for warmth.

Levine also points out that the choices a consumer makes about using an object do not exist in a vacuum – these choices are part of a tapestry of other consumption choices, and often arise because of or in synchrony with choices to consume other objects.¹⁷ Levine uses the term “modes of living” to capture this feature of people's wants, needs, and choices. We fulfill needs and make consumption choices in order to support life projects, sustain identities, and, Levine argues, pursue self-discovery.¹⁸ Levine deftly uses the example of buying a house to illustrate this point. Consumer A might buy a house because she loves to garden and it will be easier to have a garden if she has a house rather than an apartment. Gardening is important to her because she wants to feel connected to nature and because she wants to grow her own food. Consumer B buys the

¹⁶ David Levine, *Needs, Rights, and the Market* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1988), 38.

¹⁷ Levine, 11.

¹⁸ Levine, 14.

exact same house, also because she wants a garden. However, she wants a garden not because she prefers a home-grown, organic diet but because a garden is part of building an aesthetically informed lifestyle. Consumer C might also buy the house, but the house has nothing to do with gardening – the house is in a good neighborhood and is therefore the status symbol she craves.¹⁹ As we can easily imagine, any number of consumers might make the exact same consumption choice for any number of reasons, and each choice would be comprehended differently when situated within the life project of each consumer.

Thus, Jevons may be correct that the usefulness of an object is not valuable solely as a function of the labor hours it took to make it, but it is not adequate to say that something is valuable just because someone wants it, as Jevons does. An object's value is neither wholly in the object's physicality nor in the consumer's use of the object. Rather, it is contained in the mutual relationship between the two – the consumer's ability to use the object is shaped by the object's concrete material and cultural dimensions, and the consumer imbibes these dimensions with value by fitting the object into her unique mode of life. It is important to note at this point that Levine's interventions are not restricted to instances of paying money for goods and services, but any choice that involves prioritizing some instrumentally valuable thing, tangible or intangible, in a trade-off (food, healthcare, shorter commuting times, etc.). I have used the term "object" and the examples of a chair and a house for simplicity's sake.

A neoclassical economist might at this point object, "of course people have myriad preferences and gain different magnitudes of utility from their consumption

¹⁹ Levine, 11.

choices – neoclassical economics readily concedes this. There is nothing in the above example that contradicts the logic of utility and preferences on which neoclassical economics is based.” But, as we have seen, Levine’s claims lead us to wonder if utility and preferences are the *best* way to describe consumer choices. Thinking of choices in relation to modes of living would open us up to discussion of consumption beyond the logic of utilitarianism and its role in neoclassical economics, and specifically, beyond the binary of pleasure and pain on which utilitarianism relies.

Objections to the Binary of Pleasure and Pain

The weakness of this metric of utility and disutility appears starker if we turn to Charles Taylor’s theory of diverse goods, which stands as an objection to utilitarian thought more generally. As Taylor points out in his work *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, utilitarian thought (and by proxy neoclassical economics) emerged from enlightenment-era thinking, which above all valued an objective, dispassionate treatment of all subjects. Therefore by doing away with the qualitative differences between various “goods” and “bads” and reducing all of human functioning to a quantitative and subjective, but uniform, spectrum, utilitarianism was able to offer a new epistemology that appealed to the scientific sensibility of its time.²⁰

However “scientific” it might be, the idea that “happiness” is calculable and unquestioned distorts “the theoretical self-understanding of moderns.”²¹ Taylor argues that the modern conceives of herself as having inward depth and complexity, and that

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers; 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 230.

²¹ Taylor, 231.

self-discovery is a crucial attribute of modern functioning. By arranging human interaction and feeling on a linear spectrum, utilitarian thought treats desires, needs, and behaviors as arbitrary and given. It does not concern itself with the personal, social, and ethical context of these desires, needs, and behaviors, and is therefore deeply damaging to the modern's capacity for self-understanding and possibly her ability to reflect on and realize this depth.

Not only does this metric erase the depth of a modern's self-reflection, it also obscures that "goods" are qualitatively different and therefore incomparable along a single metric. These qualitative distinctions between moral imperatives and ethical codes are present in every aspect of our lives. To illustrate this, Taylor writes of four examples of familiar moral codes by which people might organize their lives. First, the person whose central goal is to live with integrity, that is to avoid "the conformity to established standards" and instead live life in accordance with personal convictions. The second is the person who wishes to be a "channel of God's love for men" by healing strife and difference and elevating humans' love for each other. Third is the person who structures her life around the modern goal of liberation; she prioritizes each individual's ability to direct his or her own life as he or she sees fit, free from the domination of natural or social mechanism. Finally, Taylor describes the person who prioritizes rationality above all else and strives to make clear, objective decisions free from illusion or self-indulgence.²²

Each of these four moral outlooks, familiar archetypes to any reader, implies a mode of life that is incompatible and contrasting to the others. With this in mind, Taylor

²² Taylor, 235.

asks, is it possible to coherently combine all moral imperatives? And therefore, is it appropriate to speak of a single morality or a single measure of goods?²³ So arises Taylor's argument that there is a *diversity* of goods that are mutually incomprehensible and irreconcilable precisely because they cannot coherently be compared to each other along a single scale.

It could be argued that this line of reasoning strengthens the case for a subjectively ordered understanding of human functioning: since no calculus is capable of determining which moral outlook is "most worthy," we resort to the measure that instructs each individual to pursue the outlook that gives her the most utility. By using the terms utility and disutility, utilitarianism, and the neoclassical thought that follows it, does not presume to understand what is worthy of pursuit for each individual. Someone who values honor and dignity more than anything else should engage in those activities that "maximize" honor and dignity, while one who organizes her life according to religious teachings gains the most utility from those activities that she classes as most pious. Interestingly, because utilitarianism bases its reasoning on truly subjective and personal measures of value, it can claim to be objective in that it is not influenced disproportionately by one viewpoint, nor does it purport one specific moral code. This echoes Jevons' sentiment (outlined above) that economics studies and predicts the choices that individuals make without prescribing ethical guidelines or passing normative judgments (though Taylor would argue this contributes to an impoverished self-understanding).

²³ Taylor, 240.

This justification for a subjectively defined metric of wellbeing might make sense if the theory of diverse goods simply suggested that within society, each individual is guided by a different ethical code. Yet Taylor's diverse goods are more complicated than this. First, these ethical codes do not apply to discreet individuals. Rather, they can only be comprehended in a social fabric; they do not arise arbitrarily and individually and cannot be understood outside of the institutions and cultural constructions that surround them. Second, individuals are not strictly governed by just one clearly defined, socially created moral vision. These imperatives are not prescriptions or litanies that explicitly lay out paths to greater utility – it is more accurate to characterize them as cumulus masses of social and cultural forces, forming and reforming into complex and changeable expressions of human functioning and thought. Any number of ethical constructions might act on one person at any time.²⁴ To characterize the problem as different levels of utility is to misstate the decisions and trade-offs that individuals face.

Consider a young professional pursuing her high-paid dream job in a city far from her hometown. While growing up, her family always encouraged her to pursue her passions, and instilled in her a respect for family and a wish to care for her loved ones. As her parents grow old and sick, she is torn between multiple moral obligations and imperatives. By staying at her current job, she can easily afford her parent's medical bills while pursuing her ambitions, as she was raised to do. Yet she is also morally impelled to move home to care for them in person. This is a simple example, but could easily become complicated when we add in more realistic layers, like a spouse's job, a wish to move back to her hometown, and so on. Love for family is incomparable to the fulfillment of

²⁴ Taylor, 236.

pursuing a career, or making a parent proud, or supporting a spouse's ambitions, or the nostalgia of returning home, or any number of other factors that might play into such a decision. As we can see from looking at this example or any aspect of our own lives, our morals are socially meaningful and also often in conflict with each other. These conflicts cannot be reconciled with a simple summation or subtraction. The multiple forces that motivate us differ not only in magnitude of importance but also in incommensurable, immeasurable qualitative differences. The denial of this, latent in the utility-disutility metric, is a mischaracterization of the issue and provides little guidance for decision-making, as we see in relation to revealed preference theory.

Beyond Revealed Preference Theory

To see how neoclassical economists imagine individuals making such decisions I now return to the idea of revealed preferences, for which the theoretical work of Jevons and his contemporaries lays an important foundation. Roughly, revealed preference theory states that a rational individual's preferences are internally consistent (if you like oranges more than bananas and bananas more than apples, you like oranges more than apples) and that if you spend resources on something, that thing must give you equal or greater utility than the resources you give up to attain it. Simply put, neoclassical economists assume an individual's preferences are arranged linearly and coherently, and that these are revealed by an individual's willingness to pay.

In his essay "Rational Fools," Amartya Sen challenges this conception. He is critical not only of the logic of preference theory, but also of the "rational human" on which the argument is based. In his criticism, Sen draws on arguments that resonate with

the reasoning of Taylor and Levine. He argues that the linear and consistent arrangement of preferences paints a restrictive portrait of its human subject: it does not allow for the possibility that we can reflect on our preferences or that our preferences are socially motivated and manipulated.²⁵ Preference theory is made possible by the logic of utilitarianism, so Sen's critique of preference ordering is akin to Taylor's critique of the metric of utility. Both thinkers agree that the individual is hemmed in and flattened by the neoclassical conception of rationality and human behavior.

Sen posits two compelling challenges to the idea of a standard preference ordering. Like Taylor's self-seeking modern, Sen's subject is self aware and able to reflect on her preferences. He thus introduces the concept of "meta-preferences," which can be understood as the desire to change one's preferences. For example, many people might wish they did not enjoy cigarettes or unhealthy foods, or want to enjoy exercising, listening to classical music, or doing homework.²⁶ These meta-preferences indicate deeper underlying desires to be healthy, to be perceived as cultured, or to be well educated, which suggests that preferences are nested and interwoven, and cannot be coherently ordered in a simple linear fashion.²⁷ The concept of meta-preferences also acknowledges that there are social pressures indicating to us what we *should* want and need, and that personal preferences, meta or otherwise, are in part products of an individual's socially constructed idea of herself.

²⁵ Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 339.

²⁶ Sen_A, 339.

²⁷ Here we see resonance between Sen's work and Levine's argument, especially in the "buying a house" example given above.

For the revealed preference theorist, choice and wellbeing are essentially synonymous: if you choose something, it increases your utility in some way. Building on his account described above, Sen takes issue with this for several reasons. First, he writes, this view of preferences presumes both too much and too little simultaneously. It presumes personal wellbeing to be too large a part in the decision-making process – an adequate theory must leave room for other factors that might influence a decision. It also presumes too little by refusing to look at anything other than choices in order to indicate preferences.²⁸ This narrow view of choice and preference, Sen argues, casts doubt on the neoclassical conception of human reasoning.

Yet Sen's argument is more complex than a standard call for broader definitions. Central to his critique is a new element, one unexamined by the neoclassical preference theorist. This element is commitment. Different from both sympathy and personal wellbeing, commitment may drive choices to be made or actions taken even when they do not benefit one's own wellbeing. Sympathy causes personal suffering from the pain of another, and personal gain from the wellbeing of another. A strict neoclassicist might imagine this narrowly as the addition of a positively correlated term to a personal utility function capturing the wellbeing of another. Yet Sen is concerned not with sympathy as a challenge to preference theory, but commitment. Commitment captures a more delicate human interaction. In this case, we are committed to the wellbeing of others even if it does not affect our own, and are therefore capable of feeling commitment to the wellbeing of people with whom we do not identify.²⁹ Because commitment does not fit

²⁸ Sen_A, 323.

²⁹ Sen_A, 326.

into an understanding of wellbeing as a utility function or a willingness to pay, it stands as a direct challenge to the logic of preference theory and the claims it supports.

In order to illustrate the distinction between sympathy and commitment Sen tells the story of two boys who find two apples, one large and one small. The first boy invites the second boy to choose the apple he prefers, and the second boy immediately chooses the larger apple. The first boy indignantly complains that this is unfair. “Well which would you have chosen?” the second boy asks. “The smaller, of course!” says the first boy. The second boy retorts, “don’t complain then, that’s the one you got!” Had the first boy’s claim that he would have chosen the smaller apple been based in sympathy (in utilitarian terms, he would have gained greater utility from the second boy eating the larger apple than had he himself eaten the apple), then he would have been satisfied with the way things went. Yet he was *not* satisfied, indicating that his hypothetical choice of the smaller apple would have been based on commitment to chivalry, politeness, or what have you, rather than sympathy.³⁰

By driving a wedge between what we choose and what we prefer, the introduction of the concept of commitment rocks the foundations of preference theory. We cannot, as many neoclassical economists would like, simply eliminate commitment from the scope of economic analysis, since commitment is in many ways essential to the functioning of society. As Sen says, you cannot run a system based entirely on incentive to personal gain or fear of personal loss. In order for social and economic systems to function, a

³⁰ Sen_A, 329.

majority of people must put aside their own personal wellbeing every day in one way or another.³¹

Consider a mundane example, illustrative of many small moments in each individual's life: jaywalking. In the decision to jaywalk, someone might weigh the increased convenience of jaywalking against feelings of sympathy for drivers and bikers who might be endangered by reckless behavior, a fear of being caught or hit (weighted based on perceived risk), and some other third factor, some sense of commitment to a community or an image of upstanding citizenry. The neoclassical preference theorist would argue that the potential jaywalker gains some modicum of utility from seeing herself as a good community member or upstanding citizen, and that this factors into her cost-benefit analysis of whether or not she should jaywalk. Yet it could be argued that this third factor stands outside both sympathy and personal gain – that although it is in her direct self-interest to increase her convenience by jaywalking, this citizen will not, because she is capable of perceiving herself as not only an individual with personal wants and needs but as a member of a complex social fabric that relies on her commitment to certain culturally conditioned behaviors.

The self-reflective individual is central to the work of Sen, Levine, and Taylor. Though they differ in the emphases of their arguments, the thinkers agree that we gain self-awareness and self-definition through consideration of and for the other. This cannot be stated in terms of externalities or interactions between individual utility functions because such a characterization presumes that the individual arises in isolation and then interacts with a social context. Sen, Levine, and Taylor suggest the converse of this: that

³¹ Sen_A, 334.

individuals are inextricably and originally linked to the social pressures and commitments surrounding them, and that their choices are only meaningful as such. Introducing social consciousness and context to the portrait of the individual undermines Jevons' claims and shows that neoclassicism is deeply limited in its ability to make meaningful contributions regarding human choices and behaviors.

The Worthiness of Wealth

Jevons comments on the laborer's pursuit of wealth only in passing. As mentioned in the preceding section, he claims "each labourer, in the absence of other motives, is supposed to devote his energy to the accumulation of wealth."³² The fact that he spends no more than a sentence on this claim is in itself telling. Jevons feels that this assumption is so obvious that it does not require further explanation or examination. That the unfettered pursuit of wealth is central to the neoclassical economy is hardly disputable. Yet this does not make it exempt from examination.

It could be argued, again from a perspective of wishing to remain objective, that the neoclassicist does not actually believe that each individual's base concern is the accumulation of money (believing as she does that money is inherently worthless and only valuable when spent). The neoclassical economist uses money as a proxy for the pursuit of something truly worthwhile so that she can abdicate the task of figuring out what, exactly, *is* inherently worthwhile, what actually *does* contribute to our wellbeing.³³ But we need not abdicate this task.

³² Jevons, 1.35.

³³ The assumption that wealth is purely a means of achieving what *is* worthwhile is a questionable one. It could easily be claimed that in the contemporary era, wealth is itself

In their book *How Much Is Enough?* Robert and Edward Skidelsky criticize the pursuit of wealth as the central economic goal, basing their argument on the failures of neoclassical logic. Wealth, they argue, is not a meaningful metric because we can literally never have enough of it – satiation is not meaningful concepts within a neoclassical system.³⁴ This is not a moralistic judgment on human nature, greed, or any other such normative claim. Rather, it is a logical observation of the neoclassical measure of value and its implications for the meaning of wealth. As discussed extensively above, neoclassical measures of value and thus wealth are fully subjective because value arises from want. Therefore “enough” wealth is, by definition, as much wealth as one wants. Above all, the theories and practices of neoclassical economics seek to allocate scarce resources efficiently, yet the concept of scarcity is a false construction because it arises from a comparison between what is available to us and what we can imagine wanting.³⁵ With such a boundless measure of the proxy for wellbeing, the neoclassical conception of wellbeing itself becomes essentially meaningless.

Addressing Possible Counterarguments

It is unlikely that Jevons, his contemporaries, and the neoclassical thinkers that follow them would argue against these various shades and complexities – that the utilitarian portrait of humanity is a simplification is, of course, not what is at issue.

Indeed, as we discussed above, Jevons is wary of economics’ ability to describe man as a

an end goal. This would suggest that the proxy by which we measure the pursuit of utility (money) becomes the source of utility itself, rendering both the measurement and the exercise of measuring nonsensical.

³⁴ Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough?: Money and the Good Life*, (New York: Other Press, 2012), 86.

³⁵ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 92.

moral being. However, in pursuing an economic calculus that relies on these simplifying assumptions, neoclassical thinkers necessarily affirm the legitimacy of these assumptions. They accept that at base, their portrait of a human is a useful one.³⁶ In so doing, the neoclassicist implicitly affirms that her simplistic form of the human is necessary and helpful in pursuing the dominant practice of economics.

The neoclassical thinker might at this point intervene with a predictably “pragmatic” objection. “All of these objections are fair,” she might say, “but the truth is, regardless of the limitations of the models, their oversights and their failures, neoclassical tools are the best ones we have. It is more pragmatic to hone these tools than to tear them down, especially when no concrete alternative can be offered.” I respond to this claim with two counterarguments.

First, the use of the term “pragmatic” in defending neoclassical economics is as flawed as it is common. What appears to be a neutral term is in fact a convenient and normative judgment used to legitimize dominant theories by marginalizing alternatives as pie-in-the-sky or niche. “Pragmatism” is simply a euphemism for “that doesn’t fit within the existing order.” Such a judgment is therefore not useful or applicable to any serious critique of neoclassicism because any such critique will necessarily stand outside of the system it examines.

Second, the dismissal of a critique due to the lack of a proposed alternative is both a positive argument and a logical fallacy that demonizes theoretical and philosophical thought. Any dominant hegemonic system, especially one that is so effectively disguised as objective and morally neutral, is worthy of being scrutinized. Further, the claim that

³⁶ Recall that although he attempts to acknowledge the limitations of his study, Jevons’ still goes as far as to claim that economics deals with men “as they are.”

pragmatism justifies avoiding scrutiny is deeply dangerous. I therefore dismiss claims that neoclassical solutions and models are the most pragmatic despite their flaws, simply because I do not subscribe to the definition of the word pragmatic as it is used in such arguments, nor am I concerned with making my own arguments appear “pragmatic” to the neoclassical mind.³⁷

I argue that neoclassical theory is willfully and repeatedly parsimonious in its portrait of humanity, that over and over again the depth and meaning of human feeling is sacrificed for the sake of a sleek, simple model designed to appeal to an empirical economist’s sensibility. I further argue that these failures and sacrifices are not benign, nor are they helpful in sketching the human being or in understanding our social lives. They are deeply damaging to the ways in which we organize our societies and perceive our wellbeing. Nowhere is this more dramatically evidenced than in the choices that are leading us to the destruction of our planet.

In concluding these sections specifically regarding neoclassical theory and practice, I wish to highlight that my critique has not been a prescriptive or moralistic one – it cannot be boiled down to “you can’t buy happiness” or “we need a system that makes us think more about others.” Rather, this has been an effort to critically engage with the underlying assumptions and internal logic of neoclassical thought.

³⁷ This does not rule out policy recommendations as a potential outcome of these arguments – though they might technically “work within the system,” such recommendations have the potential to push the bounds of existing legal frameworks and in so doing, pose a challenge to the neoclassical model of the economy.

III: Defining Wellbeing

As discussed above, within neoclassical economics, no matter the metric of wellbeing used there is an underlying singularity to the understanding of wellbeing, evidenced in the persistent idea that no matter how many virtues you enumerate, they can be equated and aggregated to equal an understanding of wellbeing. This understanding is both vague and parsimonious. It claims to be subjectively defined through preferences, yet is actually prescriptive, self-serving, and limiting to the modern self. In the following I develop an alternative understanding of wellbeing. I introduce the work of Angus Deaton, using his insights to suggest that wellbeing diverges from individually self-reported happiness, and that societal wellbeing cannot be understood as the sum of individual wellbeing.

Outlining the implications of Deaton's insights alongside Sen, Levine, and Taylor, I reemphasize the significance of acknowledging multiple and diverse goods. Further, I note that each of these thinkers champions the intrinsic value of the *pursuit* of these goods or virtues. Having explored a general understanding of wellbeing, I go on to highlight the specific virtues, the "basic goods" I find most significant in the pursuit of a good life, using the above thinkers along with Robert and Edward Skidelsky's *How Much Is Enough?* as my guide.

The Intrinsic Value of Pursuing Wellbeing

In his 2013 article "Two Happiness Puzzles," Deaton gives an overview of several counterintuitive findings of economic research on wellbeing. He discusses a study that examines the correlation between religion and several wellbeing indicators on both U.S. state-wide and individual levels. He notes that while religious people report being

happier, more religious states experience higher crime rates, teen pregnancies, divorce rates, venereal diseases per capita, and poorer health.³⁸ He explains this “aggregation puzzle,” as he calls it, by saying “one story is that religiosity is a response to a hostile environment, not the cause of it. [...] Religion provides a partial refuge from disease and distress when it can, and a promise of relief in the next world when it cannot.”³⁹ This is not a particularly outstanding insight, but rather a simple question of the direction of causality. In addition to the very believable narrative Deaton offers, I suggest two other insights that may be drawn from this puzzle.

The first echoes a theme I have hinted at earlier in the paper. This puzzle suggests that society is not simply an additive function of its members and their personally reported happiness, nor can the wellbeing of society be captured (or even estimated) by an enumerable list of measured variables in a wellbeing function. Rather, society is greater than the sum of its parts, and the health of a community is an intangible good that in and of itself benefits community members beyond a simple interaction term between individual wellbeings. This communal health is indivisible and intrinsic in that it cannot be broken down into discreet variables or represented through the use of proxies. The puzzle that Deaton has highlighted points to the necessity of a more robust and carefully examined understanding of communal wellbeing and its importance in an individual defining and pursuing a good life.

The second regards the use of happiness as a goal or metric. In the study to which Deaton refers, happiness does not appear to align with health, safety, or access to

³⁸ Angus Deaton, “Two Happiness Puzzles,” *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (2013), 593.

³⁹ Deaton, 596.

education and opportunity (in fact, they often seem to be inversely related). This does not mean, however, that health, safety, and access to education and opportunity are not worthy of pursuit. It rather indicates that reporting yourself to be happy does not indicate that you are leading a good life, and that perceived or reported happiness (however that is defined on a survey or interpreted by a wide range of people) is not the same thing as fundamental wellbeing. This is reflected in Deaton's concluding discussion of another "happiness puzzle" – the often-cited finding that women who are "autonomous" (which we may understand to mean financially independent but perhaps also liberated or empowered in the feminist sense) report lower levels of wellbeing than other women.⁴⁰ Does this mean that the empowerment of women should be abandoned as a key to creating and protecting a good life? Probably not. It reemphasizes that freedom, like health and security, are intrinsically valuable and cannot be understood as building blocks or summable variables in the pursuit of some singular understanding of wellbeing, be that "happiness" or "utility." Deaton echoes this sentiment with his concluding sentence: "To many of us, the capacities that come with greater freedom are as or more important than what we report about our feelings having been granted that freedom."⁴¹

Deaton's championing of freedom as intrinsically, in addition to instrumentally, valuable parallels Sen's emphasis on capacity building in *Development as Freedom*. Sen argues that the development of human capacities is worthwhile not only because these capacities allow people to advocate for their own safety, provide for themselves and their families, and so on, but also because striving for human potential is in itself valuable,

⁴⁰ Deaton, 596.

⁴¹ Deaton, 596.

indispensable, in the personal project of making one's life meaningful.⁴² Here, Deaton and Sen recall Levine; all three thinkers emphasize the pursuit of life projects, the building of capacities, or securing of freedoms as intrinsically worthwhile efforts.

Criteria for the Basic Goods

Having established that there is not just one measurable positive state of being but rather several different, or in Taylor's words, diverse goods, and that the struggle to achieve these diverse goods is itself virtuous, I turn now to a discussion of what these goods are. In doing so I follow the work of Skidelsky and Skidelsky, who themselves establish a list of "basic goods," which are each elements of the good life and share four defining qualities.

First, all basic goods are universal – they are not, in their essence, locally defined.⁴³ The list of basic goods as universal, while plausible, is by no means inarguable. I readily concede that basic goods may differ across cultures, and I do not seek to prescribe a single way of pursuing a good life. I present this list first to illustrate the diversity and incommensurability of the aspects of a good life (however these are defined), but also to engage in an exercise I argue to be inherently valuable and to emphasize that policy and personal action must be guided by an examination of what is inherently worthwhile. In this definition of universal, I confine my discussion of basic goods and the good life to the contemporary era. By this I mean the era in which democratic social contract theory has been dominant and the protection of equal rights

⁴² Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.: 1999), 27, 32.

⁴³ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 150.

have been central to political thought. This aligns with the work of Sen and Taylor, all of whom deal with discussions of wellbeing in the contemporary sense. The question of distillable human essence and goodness that crosses time periods requires a different philosophical discussion, which I do not engage in this paper.

Second, all basic goods are final, meaning they are not means to a greater end.⁴⁴ I argue the while basic goods must be final, they can, and almost always are, necessary for the achievement of another aspect of a good life. For example, freedom of speech is intrinsically valuable but is also necessary for the establishment of healthy communities and basic lasting safety; leisure time is intrinsically valuable but is also necessary for investment in friendships and the pursuit of life projects.

Third, Skidelsky and Skidelsky say that basic goods are not part of some other good. Freedom from cancer, they say, is both universal and final but it is not a basic good because it is part of the larger good of health.⁴⁵ Similarly, freedom from war is universal and final but it is not a basic good because it is part of the larger good of security, which also encompasses protection against assault, rape, theft, and so on.

Finally, they say that all basic goods are indispensable — too lose one is to suffer great harm.⁴⁶ A neoclassicist might interpret this condition of basic goods by saying that each of them is a complimentary good – that is, wellbeing, or some measure of the good life, cannot increase without each of these increasing, and that to lose one of these is to decrease a measure of the good life over all. It might be further argued by the neoclassical economist that the assembly of a list of basic goods that are necessary for the

⁴⁴ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 151.

⁴⁵ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 152.

⁴⁶ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 152.

pursuit of a good life is simply a different framing of the same exercise of the welfare economist. That is, one might ask, how is a list of basic goods any different from the specification of a welfare function? Before turning to my definition of basic goods I will address these arguments.

It is not the welfare economist's search to define the aspects of welfare that I take issue with, nor do I think all economic theory is in opposition to a philosophical definition of virtue; indeed, in his work *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls contributed greatly to the cannon of social philosophy with the specification of the maximin function. Rather, my main concern is that mainstream contemporary economics privileges its assumptions about the market above an honest portrait of the human subject, stretching its understandings of the functioning of humanity to a breaking point in order to accommodate the "clarifying assumptions" of scarcity, utility maximization, and revealed preference theory. Therefore in my definition of the aspects of the good life I distance my discussion from any claims about markets, and I make no assumptions about the "rationality" of human behavior.

Further, I argue that the specification of a welfare function differs greatly from the exercise of imagining a good life simply because the specification of a welfare function is not intrinsically virtuous, while the practice of defining wellbeing may in itself be an indispensable aspect of the creation of the good life; the search for virtue is itself virtuous. This premise recalls the work of Sen, Deaton, and Levine, who emphasize capacities, freedoms, and the pursuit of life projects as inherently valuable.

The Basic Goods

I turn now to a specific discussion of wellbeing, following the work of Skidelsky and Skidelsky. Their list of seven basic goods includes: *health, security, personality, harmony with nature, leisure, respect, and friendship*.⁴⁷ In the following I discuss each of these seven, offering clarification, complexity, and at times challenges to Skidelsky and Skidelsky's descriptions of the basic goods.

Perhaps the two least contestable basic goods are *health* and *security*. Health can be understood as physical wellbeing, nourishment, and access to sufficient care, while security is characterized as the reasonable expectation that one's life will not be interrupted by war, crime, violence, or persecution.⁴⁸ Incidentally, the two least contestable goods are also the goods that are guaranteed to be transgressed at the end of every human life—that is, each life gives way to a loss of either health or security. However it cannot be contested that society benefits from a pursuit of these two goods.

What *is* contestable is the extent to which these goods remain good in all circumstances. Health, for example, becomes controversial in areas of life support for the very elderly and abortion practice, both of which may be seen to desecrate the good life, depending on one's perspective. Similarly, with regard to security, one can imagine "too much security" impeding the pursuit of the good life – constant armament, surveillance, and awareness of imminent danger may breed widespread anxiety or paranoia. Further, one person might define security as the right to bear arms, while another person might feel that she is endangered by guns carried by her fellow citizens. This paper does not presume to offer definitive answers regarding gun control, the Hippocratic oath, or

⁴⁷ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 154 – 165.

⁴⁸ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 154 – 156.

reproductive rights; I simply wish to acknowledge that these goods may have bounds outside of which they cease to be good, and that the constant collaborative negotiation of these bounds is a necessary and inherently virtuous aspect of the creation of the good life.

Less concretely definable than health and security, though equally worthy of consideration, is the good Skidelsky and Skidelsky call *personality*.⁴⁹ I prefer to term this good the *capacity to pursue life projects*. In doing so I unite the work of Sen, whose capacity-based approach emphasizes capacity building as both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable, and Levine, who repeatedly highlights the importance of the individual's "life project." By life project I, like Levine, mean the freedom and ability to fulfill and create one's life based on self-directed goals and values.

It is in reference to this basic good that Taylor's diverse goods are most useful—though they apply to most of the other basic goods as well (as we have seen with both health and security), it is in the pursuit of an individual life project that one may be personally challenged by the conflict between diverse goods. Such personal conflict is discussed at length in the preceding section. Though the diversity, complexity, and often irreconcilability of these goods may challenge the individual's ability to create a fulfilling life it in no way undermines such a pursuit. Rather, as I have argued before, the negotiation of these goods is in itself a key aspect of any life project; such negotiations cannot be understood as cleanly executed tradeoffs because the struggle to make the tradeoff itself may be an act of deeper self-understanding.

Implicit in Skidelsky and Skidelsky's description of personality as a good is a liberal focus on the individual. Though I also make room in my definition for the

⁴⁹ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 160.

personal nature of life projects, I wish to note that my use of the term “life projects” rather than “personality” leaves room for a collaborative, communal, or inter-personal experience. I further explore this departure from Skidelsky and Skidelsky’s liberal priorities below.

Skidelsky and Skidelsky continue their list of the basic goods with *harmony with nature*. In their discussion of the human-nature relationship, the two authors present and then rejecting two extreme relationships to nature. The first they term “shallow environmentalism,” which argues for the conservation of the environment based on its utility to human kind in the form of exploitable resources. They argue that this relationship does not represent the basic good of harmony with nature because it neither captures the aesthetic and spiritual relationship to nature well-documented throughout human history, nor is it a “final” good, since it views nature as a means to an end.⁵⁰ The second relationship they call “deep environmentalism,” a viewpoint that claims all of nature to be intrinsically worthy outside of human valuation. They dismiss this understanding of nature for two reasons: first, they claim, the grouping of all organic matter into one category (“nature”) is a human construction and therefore not meaningful outside of a human valuation. Further, they argue, it is patently ridiculous to claim that all of “nature” is worthy of preservation on the part of humanity— that eradicating a small-pox virus is the same as killing a dog.⁵¹ Skidelsky and Skidelsky instead argue for a third view of nature, an aesthetic and philosophical treatment. They present harmony with nature as analogous to one’s relationship to a garden: nature as both a concept and a

⁵⁰ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 137.

⁵¹ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 138.

physicality worthy of being protected is shaped in accordance with the human sensibility, yet also flourishes independent from complete human control.⁵²

Though Skidelsky and Skidelsky do not explicitly state this, it seems that both deep environmentalists and shallow environmentalists fail in their understanding of the worthiness of nature because they divorce the human from the natural. The “garden relationship” may be more truthful or worthwhile because it emphasizes the human as part of nature and vice versa, and the opportunity to experience one’s self as such is both intuitively appealing and worthy of being protected.

Continuing their definition of the good life, Skidelsky and Skidelsky champion the worthiness of *leisure*. Skidelsky and Skidelsky are careful to point out that while a substitution away from labor may leave more room for leisure, leisure is not simply “not work;” unlike rest, leisure is characterized by spontaneity and the cultivation of skill. In Marxian terms leisure can be described as “non-alienated labor,” that is, action free from external compulsion.⁵³ Therefore work that is compensated with money could hypothetically be leisure – it is the socially conditioned and institutionally enforced compulsion to work that makes contemporary labor different from leisure, according to Skidelsky and Skidelsky. But why is leisure a basic good? Non-leisure time is time spent doing something for the sake of something else, and therefore life without leisure, Skidelsky and Skidelsky argue, “is a life spent always in preparation, never in actual living. Leisure is the wellspring of higher thought and culture, for it is only when emancipated from the pressure of need that we really *look* at the world.”⁵⁴

⁵² Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 140.

⁵³ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 165.

⁵⁴ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 166.

This defense of leisure undermines a favorite neoclassical boogie-man: the idea that if we stop incentivizing labor or investment (with property taxes, estate taxes, more progressive income taxes, shorter working days, income redistribution policies, welfare safety nets, and so on), the flow of innovation and creative energy, so necessary for growth, will be stymied. This line of argument is flawed in two ways. First, it offers an immensely shallow understanding of human creativity, positing that without the carrot-and-stick of profit and loss we would be utterly unimaginative and dull. Second, it casts human innovation as a cog in the growth machine and not something inherently precious or remarkable, failing to acknowledge that perhaps *growth* is the part of this sequence that is only instrumentally valuable, that *growth* should be pursued only insofar as it enhances general capacity to live creative and innovative lives, and not the other way around.

This perspective on growth recalls the neoclassical tenet of scarcity discussed in a prior section; as long as scarcity is defined as the differential between what we can imagine wanting and what is available to us, we will always live in destitute paucity. Yet this neoclassical description does not appeal to any sense of intuition—the western world, and much of the world beyond, exudes abundance (the distribution of this abundance is, of course, a completely different issue). It is not intuitively accurate to say that the major economic problem is maximization in the face of scarcity, yet this continues to be a guiding principle as long as we define scarcity and want in neoclassical terms. Therefore Skidelsky and Skidelsky’s emphasis on a substitution toward leisure and away from labor necessarily challenges us to reimagine our understandings of “enough.”

Having established my definitions of leisure, harmony with nature, health, security, and life projects (or personality) I turn now to those aspects of Skidelsky and Skidelsky's argument that I find less intuitively appealing. The first is *respect*. Quite simply, I find their definition of this term to be vague and unhelpful. In my interpretation of this good, I prefer to split respect into two categories. First, *democratic rights* must, in the contemporary era, be understood as a basic good. The inclusion of democratic rights is not meant to marginalize or erase peoples or societies that exist outside of democratic frameworks but rather to acknowledge that in a post-colonial era, the ability to self-determine outside of the structure of a nation-state has been deeply undermined, and that within the hegemonic structure of the nation-state the democratic rights are worthy of being protected.

In addition to the protection of the institutional respect for the citizen, there is a second, more social, aspect of Skidelsky and Skidelsky's respect, which I prefer to call *dignity*. To illustrate the distinction between democratic rights and the preservation of dignity, I use the example of racism against black Americans in its many forms: the abolition of slavery, suffrage, and the end of segregation all factor into the protection of democratic rights, which are the just deserts of any citizen, yet these democratic rights do *not* protect against social and institutional racism in the form of higher incarceration rates, tokenism, fetishism, degrading stereotypes, and regressive media portrayals (to name but a few social phenomena that persistently plague black communities). Protection from these (and many other) social ills constitutes dignity, and is a basic good and tenet of the good life. Dignity, like all other goods, has negotiable bounds. It is true to say that all people deserve to be free from relentless social marginalization, yet to what degree

different transgressions undermine the basic good of dignity is a difficult question. Do we deserve to be free from feelings of humiliation, shame, degradation, and alienation at every part of our lives? And if we are not at all times protected from such transgressions, is it accurate to say that the goodness of our lives has been compromised? Perhaps some feelings of loss of respect may be helpful in prompting us to self-reflection. Though such questions mark an ongoing pursuit to define the specifics of human dignity, it can be agreed that human dignity in its most basic form is indispensable to the leading of a good life.

Skidelsky and Skidelsky also include “friendship” as a basic good, arguing that human companionship (including family, romantic relationships, and so on) is a fundamental good.⁵⁵ They choose to include “friendship” instead of “community” because they find the word “community” to be overwrought and lacking in meaning.⁵⁶ I do not object to the inclusion of friendship as a basic good, and in fact find it to be one of the less contentious goods, but I disagree with the exclusion of community. However much of a buzzword this has become in recent literature, it cannot reasonably be left off of any list that seeks to define human wellbeing. Community overlaps with but differs from friendship. While friendship may refer to intimate one-on-one relationships (which are indisputably valuable), community refers to a human context in which to define one’s self. Alienation from one’s community, even if specific friendships are preserved, is surely damaging to one’s wellbeing.

Skidelsky and Skidelsky’s mistrust of an emphasis on the community reflects the liberal individualist leanings mentioned above. They are concerned that communal

⁵⁵ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 163.

⁵⁶ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 163.

pressure can become oppressive and is likely to trespass upon the freedom of the individual.⁵⁷ Though I concede that this is a possibility, I also argue that in many instances, community makes possible the rights and freedoms of the individual. As with all other goods, there are negotiable bounds to the goodness of community, but this does not preclude community from being a basic good in some capacity.

In my definition, a universalizable good life can be defined in terms that run parallel to Skidelsky and Skidelsky's postulate. The good life in the contemporary era, that is, the era in which the individual's equal rights are prioritized, is defined by good health, security, harmony with nature, the capacity to conduct a life project, time for leisure, friendship, community, human dignity, and the protection of democratic rights and freedoms. I concede that across the world it is the privileged and the few who experience each of these goods, and I do not mean to imply that the unhealthy, the disabled, the endangered and disenfranchised, and so on cannot lead good lives. I simply argue that these goods are guiding tenets for the pursuit of a good life. To echo Angus Deaton, it may be the pursuit of these tenets and the struggle to further define them that is equally or more virtuous than the achievement of the goods themselves.

⁵⁷ Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 164.

IV: Environmentalism and the Good Life

The word “environmentalism” has become trite through overuse. Whether it reminds one of “eco-friendly” products packaged in craft paper or brings to mind yet another petition calling earnestly to “save” the rainforest, it seems that this word has lost its descriptive ability; it does not capture the urgency of its own project, nor the catastrophic scope of the problems it addresses. Before engaging in a discussion of environmentalism and the good life, I therefore wish to re-emphasize the most serious meaning of this word. By environmentalism I do not echo the snappy imperative to “go green!” nor do I engage in doom’s-day-style warnings. Instead, I mean to reiterate the inherently worthy project of transforming human behavior and imagination so that it more harmoniously aligns with our wellbeing in the most fundamental sense. Environmentalism by its truest and most sincere definition, then, *is* the pursuit of the good life. I will discuss climate change as a way of exploring my claims, because it has emerged as the key environmental issue of our times, though I am sensitive to the long history of environmental activism and thought that precedes an awareness of climate change.

Environmentalism and the Basic Goods

Though often represented as a sacrifice or a tradeoff with human wellbeing, environmentally conscious behaviors actually align with many of the basic goods. Apart from “harmony with nature,” (the parallels with which are evident), the building of meaningful communities, the protection of one’s health and security, the creation of leisure time, and the preservation one’s democratic rights either advance or are advanced by environmental pursuits. Simply put, though fighting climate change inevitably comes

with many serious inconveniences, expenses, and challenges, it also gives us the opportunity to re-examine what is meaningful and the motivation to alter our behaviors to more consciously pursue the basic tenets of a good life. It is crucial that we think of environmentalism not just a series of cost-benefit analyses, that we not allow our project to become the weighing of narrower profit margins against the costs of forced migration, the burden of joblessness against the healthcare costs associated with mosquito-borne illness. Again, here, we recall Taylor's emphasis on diverse and incommensurable goods in human society. A serious call to reshape our societies and lives is crucial not just in fighting climate change but also in the project of taking the pursuit of our own wellbeing seriously.

The urgency to end climate change in order to protect our own health and security is obvious and irresistible. The scientific community overwhelmingly agrees that climate change will have massive negative impacts on global agricultural output,⁵⁸ will increase the spread of infectious diseases,⁵⁹ will force mass migrations due to land and resource loss,⁶⁰ and will destroy lives, communities, and property by causing increasingly extreme weather patterns.⁶¹ In addition to threatening local communities with natural disasters, as resources become more and more scarce, international cooperation and community could

⁵⁸ "Agriculture and Food Supply," *Environmental Protection Agency*, accessed April 3, 2016, <https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/impacts/agriculture.html>

⁵⁹ "Health and Climate Change," *World Health Organization*, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/>.

⁶⁰ "Climate Impacts on Global Issues," *Environmental Protection Agency*, accessed April 3, 2016, <https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/impacts/international.html>.

⁶¹ "Understanding the Link Between Climate Change and Extreme Weather," *Environmental Protection Agency*, accessed April 3, 2016, <https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/science/extreme-weather.html>.

splinter and result in conflict over water and arable land.⁶² It is unequivocal that climate change poses a heinous threat to human wellbeing in the most fundamental sense, and that environmentalism is integral to any meaningful effort to preserve individual health and safety as well as international community and security.

Conversely, sincere investment in one's community fosters environmentally conscious behaviors by superseding hyper-individualistic lifestyles. Community based transportation (public transit, car-pooling, etc.) and food sourcing in the form of co-ops, Community Sourced Agriculture (CSA), and local farms decrease a household's carbon footprint while invigorating communal relationships. Further, local public spaces decrease demand for large houses and long, private trips outside of the community. These are simply a few basic and intuitive examples of the ways in which vibrant communal life and shared local economies might alter the environmentally degrading hyper-individualistic habits while creating meaningful and desired social bonds; it is not difficult to imagine a host of other ways in which this connection might make itself evident.

The fundamental connection between community-building and ending climate change extends beyond the local level. It is widely understood that we will not be able to avoid staying beneath the generally accepted benchmark of 2.5° C of warming without international cooperation. Under a global cap and trade scheme, for example, industrialized nations would bear the cost of poorer nations' abatement, allowing poorer nations to profit while transitioning to more sustainable technologies. Policies such as this one that rely on international coordination for abatement have the added advantage of

⁶² "Climate Impacts on Global Issues," *Environmental Protection Agency*, accessed April 3, 2016, <https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/impacts/international.html>.

redistributing wealth while fostering a sense of responsibility and cooperation between nations. We are prompted to recall Sen's insight regarding commitment to higher ideals regardless of their weight on our private conveniences and preferences. In addition to securing our health and safety, coordinated efforts between societies and nations to address climate change compels us to reexamine the ideals to which we are committed and reorganize our communities, local and global, to better reflect these commitments.

Like a commitment to reinvigorating and re-examining both local and global communities, the creation of true leisure time also interrupts unfulfilling and environmentally unsound lifestyles. Substituting labor for leisure demands personal re-examination of what is "enough" and, as economic theory states, requires a substitution away from consumption. However, this substitution may itself contribute to the good life if it is a movement away from instrumental toward intrinsic value and if it affords one the opportunity to reexamine personal life projects, needs, and goals. This personal choice can be scaled up to be understood as society-level "degrowth," which would mark a movement away from the hollow project of surplus accumulation and a culture-wide commitment to an intrinsically good life.

In his work *Toward a Steady State Economy*, Herman Daly posits an argument that reflects this perspective on "degrowth." He asserts that the physical constraints of the planet, so powerfully evidenced by environmental degradation, require us to transition toward a steady-state economy.⁶³ Daly denounces "Growthmania," which he characterizes as the ubiquitous obsession with growth as a solution to all problems, born

⁶³ Herman E. Daly, *Toward a Steady State Economy*, (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1974), 153.

of neoclassicism's framing of want, and therefore scarcity, as infinite.⁶⁴ He astutely notes that "Growthmania" perpetuates and legitimizes itself by positing growth as the solution to all of the negative aspects of growth, and therefore does not recognize any costs to growth, only benefits. Daly illustrates, "is the water table falling? Dig deeper wells, build bigger pumps, and up goes GNP! Mines depleted? Build more expensive refineries to process lower grade ore, and up goes GNP!"⁶⁵ Simply, by positioning itself as the remedy to all of the ailments it causes, a growth-based economy entraps us in the belief that non-market solutions are not pragmatic or feasible. Daly continues, "as more and more of the finite physical world is converted into wealth, less and less is left over as non-wealth [...]. This creates an illusion of becoming better off, when in actuality we are becoming worse off."⁶⁶ By necessity, the neoclassical tenets of unbridled want and resulting scarcity beget reliance on a growth-based economy, and in doing so lead us directly away from what is best for our wellbeing. Thus a society-wide re-examination of needs and wants, and a subsequent movement toward leisure and away from consumption would simultaneously slow climate change, advance environmental projects, and contribute to wellbeing.

In his book *Deep Economy*, Bill McKibben echoes the idea that environmentalism offers us an opportunity to reorganize our priorities and reinvigorate our pursuit of wellbeing. McKibben presents the imperatives of environmentalism in the industrialized world not as harrowing burdens, but as opportunities for critical evaluation and careful reorganization of societal structures. McKibben emphasizes the richness and resilience of

⁶⁴ Daly, 150.

⁶⁵ Daly, 150.

⁶⁶ Daly, 151

communal living and its ability to both alter damaging behaviors and contribute to personal fulfillment. Especially compelling is McKibben's narrative of eating only locally produced food. In the description of his year eating only from the Lake Champlain Valley, McKibben unites the basic human pleasure of eating good food with community, innovation, and sustainability. The environmental incentives to eat locally produced and organic food from small farms are straightforward: the average American bite travels 1500 miles before consumption, and each bushel of corn produced on a government-subsidized "mega-farm" requires half a barrel of oil to produce, a calculation that does not include the packaging and storage necessary to keep costs low for agricultural conglomerates.⁶⁷ Intuitively, food production that relies on a small local market and uses labor rather than heavy machinery is far more environmentally sound.

Alongside the environmental justification, McKibben emphasizes the simple pleasures of eating fresh produce, meat, and dairy and the stronger sense of community that arises from engaging with community-sourced agriculture groups, farmer's markets, microbreweries, and family farms. By contrast "Big Agra" is not only responsible for around ten percent of American carbon emissions⁶⁸ (this does not include food transportation), it is also deeply detrimental to communities built around family farms⁶⁹ and produces an extremely narrow range of crops; commercial crops are dominated by corn, soy, hay, and oats. As McKibben says, "essentially we are subsidizing Cheetos."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy*, (New York: Saint Martin's Griffin, 2007), 64.

⁶⁸ "Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions," *Environmental Protection Agency*, accessed April 3, 2016, <https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/sources.html>.

⁶⁹ McKibben, 57.

⁷⁰ McKibben, 87.

Unlike the other authors discussed, McKibben does not forward a particular social or political philosophy. Rather, his work offers a tangible personal narrative that frames environmentalism, community, and personal fulfillment in an intuitive and appealing way. It is easy to imagine that reinvigorating and investing in communities might not only stimulate the technologies of production necessary to fight climate change, it might also reflect a shift toward the identification and pursuit of what we actually want.

Like McKibben, Naomi Klein, in her book *This Changes Everything*, frames the fight against climate change as an opportunity to re-examine social organization. However, though she also touches on the importance of community organizing and a movement away from hyper-individualistic lifestyles, Klein specifically focuses on corporate infringement on democratic rights within industrialized nations, how this contributes to climate change, and the ways in which the environmental movement offers a forum in which to advocate for and protect democratic rights.⁷¹ Klein's work re-emphasizes the intertwined relationship between the pursuit of the basic goods (here, democratic rights) and the fight against climate change.

In wealthy and industrialized societies, democratic rights are less likely to be infringed upon in overt ways such as slavery or formal disenfranchisement, and instead are threatened by more invisible and insidious forces. Klein repeatedly exposes the privileging of corporate interests above the wellbeing of the citizenry in contemporary society. Legislation that protects the "rights" of corporations and industries, specifically Big Pharmaceuticals, Big Agriculture, and Big Oil directly undermines an individual's participation power within a democracy while undercutting the idea that democracy is a

⁷¹ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 7.

good in itself.⁷² This consolidation and protection of corporate power actively blocks environmental interests and slows or weakens environmental policy and advocacy; as Klein notes, corporate wealth in the pharmaceutical, agricultural, oil, and chemical sectors funds think tanks that disseminate information to “disprove” climate change, empowers politicians that oppose abatement policies, and pays to lobby for more favorable corporate conditions.⁷³ Thus action taken to protect democratic rights and freedoms against consolidated corporate power is also action taken to forward the fight against climate change.

A possible challenge is that I have ignored the costs of climate change abatement. Abatement from carbon may mean job loss, the destruction of local industry, and other truly burdensome economic costs. Further, it is overwhelmingly likely that already-marginalized groups will bear these burdens far more than the wealthy and empowered. Yet it is not environmentalism itself that is responsible for the burdens borne by these groups – indeed, by calling for stronger communities, the protection of democratic rights, the careful inspection of our wants and needs, and the basic provision of our health and security, the fight against climate change calls also for the consideration and protection of the good life for all. By holding society at large responsible for making vast behavioral shifts, the fight against climate change creates many inconveniences as well as true losses. Yet it also forces us to reconsider our social priorities, not least of which is the ways in which marginalized peoples are impacted by or protected from the affects of climate change.

⁷² Klein, 78.

⁷³ Klein, 45.

Neoclassicism and Environmentalism

There is no dearth of economic literature regarding environmental policy and climate change. Indeed, the policy instruments dearest to economic hearts (most notably, carbon taxation and cap-and-trade schemes) may be the most “effective” ways of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, incentivizing investment in sustainable technology, and generally curbing polluting behaviors on the part of both consumers and firms.⁷⁴ Surely such policies will only grow in importance as political action becomes more and more imperative, and economic analysis will remain a key tool in advancing these policies. Despite this role for economists, the tenets of neoclassicism and their implications for the ways in which we frame the problems we face are in many ways deeply damaging to environmentalism’s fundamental project.

Many economists, perhaps most notably William Nordhaus, have devoted their careers to estimating the social benefits associated with carbon abatement, the risk and uncertainty surrounding climate change, the probabilities of certain costs being incurred.⁷⁵ Such scholarship generates estimates that are integral in recommending policy for carbon abatement, without which potential support for such policies would be impossible. Yet the marginal cost-benefit analyses of carbon abatement that is central to this discussion, essentially a conversation of how urgently we need to give up a certain amount of carbon, reduces all the costs and benefits to one equitable metric and in doing

⁷⁴ For thorough discussions of these powerful policy instruments, see Nathaniel Keohane, “Cap and Trade, Rehabilitated: Using Tradable Permits to Control U.S. Greenhouse Gases,” *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy*, Vol. 3 (2009).

⁷⁵ For further reading on this topic, see William Nordhaus, *The Climate Casino* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

so reiterates the stubborn and myopic commitment to a binary interpretation of what is valuable, what is dangerous, what motivates our choices.

Such an analysis weighs the burden of increased unemployment against the loss of life and property, compares the costs of disease to the foregone profits from shutting down firms, and generally ignores the inconveniently unquantifiable tragedies of lost biodiversity and natural beauty due to environmental degradation by relying on the assignment of dollar values. Again neoclassical economic practice is unable to make distinctions between what is intrinsically valuable – life, health, natural beauty, community, safety – and what is only instrumentally valuable – growth, wealth, property. Again neoclassical economic practice only considers what is convenient to measure, only factors in variables and quantities as long as they can be reduced to a dollar amount. Though economists are practiced in transforming the externalities of air quality, illness, forced migration, and so on into dollar amounts, something is lost in this act. More than just failing to capture completely the value of each of these intangibles, more than forcing economists to ignore the externalities that cannot be quantified no matter how momentous they may be, the practice of measuring intrinsic value against instruments like wealth and growth alienates us from our ability to define and pursue the inherently worthy aspects of our lives.

The use of cost-benefit analyses to compare intrinsic goods against instrumental goods or hollow pursuits indiscriminately, a practice that is central to climate change economics, re-emphasizes the singular pursuit of surplus maximization. To reiterate a central and basic position, surplus maximization as the central goal, and the resulting alienation from what is inherently valuable, arise from the intertwined neoclassical

concepts of scarcity and utility. One's utility, unbounded by any reasonable understanding of what is needed, worthy, or enough, is measured only against how much utility one *could* have. From this naturally arises insatiability and scarcity, which can only be satisfied by *more* (synonymously, surplus production). Thus the way that neoclassical economics collapses any distinction between what is intrinsically valuable and what is only instrumentally valuable, hollow, or possibly even detrimental alienates us from our ability to identify and pursue the true aspects of a good life.

These central pillars and their detrimental impacts on our understanding of wellbeing play out in the ways in which the environmental movement organizes itself and communicates its messages. To use two previously established terms, the distinction between deep and shallow environmentalism (in the vernacular, conservation and preservation, respectively) reflects the neoclassical framing of the problem of climate change. The two stances stand at the extremes of the divorce between human and nature: one suggests that nature is utterly separate from humanity and worthwhile outside of human appreciation, while the other values natural resources only insofar as they are useful to humanity and conserves them only to be used in the future. Unexpectedly, these seemingly polar opposites at the core of the environmental discussion together illustrate the internal contradictions of neoclassical thought. Deep environmentalism legitimizes itself by removing the human subject, invoking the same scientific tradition on which neoclassicism rests. Deep environmentalism's insistence that "nature" exists outside of a human conception and is worthy of preservation outside of human valuation reflects the neoclassical commitment to disengaging from humanity so that its metric of value appears objective. Shallow environmentalism bases itself on utterly subjective values,

showing a blatant disregard for the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value and reducing all value to the same metric of utility.

The utilitarian practice of retaining objectivity through singular reliance on subjective and instrumental metrics characterizes the divide between preservationism and conservationism just as it characterizes neoclassical thought. To reiterate, both preservation environmentalism and neoclassicism legitimize themselves by gaining distance from the human subject. Meanwhile, both conservation environmentalism and neoclassicism only consider instrumental value, and in doing so ignore the intrinsic value of an individual's relationship with her social and physical context. Nowhere in the neoclassical framing of environmentalism, shallow or deep, is there room for the self-aware human subject and her relationship to "nature," to the environment, to her own behaviors as they pertain to the central goals of environmentalism. This eclipse of environmentalism's true project is a product of neoclassical economics' general blindness to the self-aware, self-conscious, and socially oriented modern subject.

Conclusion

Neoclassical economics is characterized by its commitment to a utilitarian understanding of human wellbeing as a metric of pain or pleasure. This polar arrangement of human experience gives rise to several implications for the neoclassical portrait of human functioning. First, in this conception, we exist in a constant state of insatiability and thus in a constant state of scarcity. Second, in the absence of any true inquiry about what comprises human wellbeing, surplus stands as a proxy for goodness, since insatiability can only ever be satisfied by more. Third, when the virtues of a good human life are measured along one two dimensional metric of magnitude and sign, there is no sensitivity to differences between goods or the treatment of some values as intrinsic and some values as instrumental.

These three implications of neoclassical economics are damaging to the modern self-perception and the ability of the modern individual to define and pursue what is good in life. The portrait drawn by neoclassicism shows the human subject to be incapable of determining intrinsic worth, lacking in self-awareness, uncommitted to any ideal beyond personal pleasure, and unconnected to any social context. This portrait alienates us from the pursuit of what is intrinsically valuable while fostering a perpetual sense of dissatisfaction and desire for more. Further, under neoclassicism, the depth of the human subject is erased – in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the contemporary empiricist, neoclassical theory abandons those aspects of humanity that are “non-rational,” unpredictable, unquantifiable, or otherwise challenging to the base assumptions of the neoclassical model. Essentially, neoclassicism separates its model of human functioning

and behavior from a sincere engagement with human character in order to preserve the integrity of its own parsimonious theories.

The erasure of the human subject and the contradictory yet simultaneous blindness to intrinsic value plagues our framing of climate change and the environmental movement. This is most clearly evidenced in the polarization of environmentalism as preservationism or conservationism. By framing climate change problems using neoclassical models and assumptions, the trade-offs become flattened, and the most fundamental goals of environmentalism are ignored. Therefore the grip of neoclassical theory must be loosened, its assumptions challenged, its recommendations second-guessed. It is crucial that we understand neoclassicism not as a science but as a technique born from social philosophy, rife with bias and weakened by its parsimonious and obtuse portrait of its subject.

Environmentalism in the truest sense reaffirms the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, and centers on the good life by seeking to alter human behaviors so that they more accurately protect and pursue human wellbeing. Environmental pursuits are therefore intrinsically valuable, yet are also instrumentally linked to the basic goods. Health, security, and harmony with nature are indisputably reliant upon fighting climate change. Further, environmentalism both relies on and incentivizes the creation of leisure time by challenging the commitment to growth and wealth accumulation. Similarly, the fight against climate change is invigorated by the innovations and reorganizations of local communities and compels international cooperation and responsibility within the international community. Finally, by forcing us to reexamine social priorities and

organization, environmentalism offers us a new frontier on which to fight for democratic rights and human dignity in the contemporary era.

The sincere pursuit of the good life, then, includes a full awareness of environmental goals in the truest sense. By the same token, environmentalism is worthwhile because it offers a rare and powerful opportunity to restructure our societies, to challenge neoclassical portraits of human functioning, and to reimagine our own wellbeing.

The threat of climate change stands as a powerful challenge to our commitment to wealth accumulation and points to the flaws in our social organization. The fight against climate change comes with immense tradeoffs, but these tradeoffs themselves are powerful forces in our pursuit of the good life because they demand that we think about what is truly important and what would be liberating to let go of. Environmentalism in its truest form demands a distinction between what is intrinsically worthwhile and what is only instrumental or empty of value. It asks us to turn away from the flat neoclassical understanding of worth. It asks us to embrace the opportunity to reimagine our selves, our communities, and our own good lives.

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