

## THE ECONOMICS OF HAPPINESS

Philippians 4:4-7

One of the main impulses behind the first attempts to develop an economics of happiness came from developing countries in South and South East Asia, such as Bhutan and Thailand which, in the name of their own cultures, constructed a challenge to Western models of 'development'. Such thinking has helped influence the establishment by the United Nations of a UN Human Development Index. Now indices of that sort are being promoted in many of the so-called 'developed' countries such as Canada and the United States.

But the fact that such indices are becoming popular does not necessarily mean that they represent sound economics. To meet that challenge one response has been to take particular economic factors such as employment/unemployment, working conditions, workplace stress, hours and free time, levels of income and indebtedness, types of possession and forms of consumption, safe and healthy environment, etc. and to see how these correlate with people's sense of well-being. That approach amounts to dealing with existing economic thinking on its own ground.

A second, more radical, response is precisely to move the debate onto a more fundamental ground. To insist, in other words, that economics itself must be seen in the wider framework of anthropology, sociology, psychology and morality. That is a theme that has been running through these reflections. Here the starting point is to ask people what they value and then to see how economic systems and structures can accommodate this. Thus the sort of factors that can be taken into account range from individual matters such as the incidence of mental and physical health, relationships/isolation or substance abuse, to social considerations like status, levels of voluntary activity or anti-social behaviour, to environmental issues like green spaces or air pollution, and to political questions such as justice, security and participation. It is not a question of reducing economics to such considerations but of making sure that they are not kept outside in a separate compartment, an analogy used by Stephen Green in his book *Good Value*.

A comprehensive approach, which seeks to combine the objective and subjective factors has been adopted by the International Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress set up by President Sarkozy of France. Its report, published this September, recognised the need for improving existing measures of economic resources before going beyond GDP

and measuring well-being. When looking at well-being it stressed the need to distinguish between inputs and socially desirable outcomes and between current well-being and sustainability.

In all of this we need, of course, to apply our critical faculties. 'Happiness' is not reducible to some 'feel-good' factor. Simply feeling happy is not the same as living the good life. Nor is it an indication of a state of justice. Amartya Sen, in his recent book, *The Idea of Justice*, has called attention to the powerful tendency of adaptive behaviour in human nature. Too often, he reminds us, have women or members of minority ethnic groups or those trapped in a class society, claimed to be 'happy' with their lot, when in fact they are accepting a situation deemed to be inevitable or 'natural', due more to the weight of custom or a spirit of resignation than to a belief that this is just. Who can be 'happy' about that?

In the words of President Sarkozy on receiving the report of the International Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress: 'The crisis doesn't only make us free to imagine other models, another future, another world. It obliges us to do so.'

An 'economics of happiness' is a vitally important area of exploration. Fortunately it is well underway in the UK. And, at the William Temple Foundation, some of the sharpest Christian minds have been addressing the question.

### ACTION

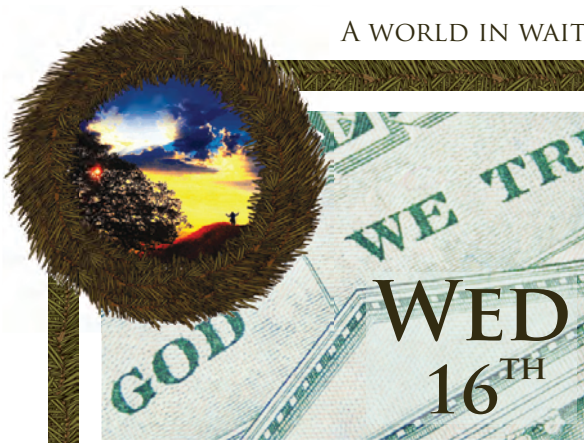
#### What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

International Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress  
<http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/>

The Happy Planet Index  
<http://www.happyplanetindex.org>

The American Human Development Project  
<http://measureofamerica.org>

Ian Steedman, John R. Atherton, Elaine Graham eds.,  
*Political Economy, Religion and Wellbeing: The Practices of Happiness*, London: Routledge, 2010  
[http://www.wtf.org.uk/documents/AHRCSynopsis\\_000.doc](http://www.wtf.org.uk/documents/AHRCSynopsis_000.doc)



One of the casualties of the economic crisis may be 'The Age of Excess' – or will it?

From all sides a strong critique has been emerging of our collective behaviour, even for more than a decade before the credit crunch. It has been coming from theologians (Will Samson, *Enough: Contentment in an Age of Excess*), by economists (Kurt Andersen, *Reset: How the Crisis Can Restore Our Values and Renew America*) and by psychoanalysts (Adam Phillips, once described as 'the closest thing we have to a philosopher of happiness').

Now that we are in the midst of an economic crisis, particular kinds of excess are coming in for even sharper attack – the unbounded greed on the part of bankers, the irresponsible levels of debt incurred by pleasure-seeking consumers. Meanwhile the growing environmental crisis is focussing our attention on other kinds of excess – our excessive demands for goods and activities which are high in energy-use and in waste-production, the depletion of natural resources, the exhaustion of fishing stocks.

Economists like to pose the central problem in economics as being one of scarcity – not enough supply to meet demand. But scarcity will always remain a problem until we take a more critical look at the demand side of the equation. To suggest that this means a call for a return to Puritan asceticism is to miss the point. Puritanism is also an extreme.

The important tasks are to try to identify which kinds of excess are causing most harm – to individuals, to society and to the environment, then to discover the causes and then to break the habit. Why are we so addicted to excess? Why can't we ever seem to get enough? Why must it always be more and louder, bigger and more violent, more sensational and more grotesque – whether shopping, binge drinking, over-eating, sexual promiscuity. What on earth is wrong with us?

The problem is not that our appetites – for food, drink,

## AGE OF EXCESS

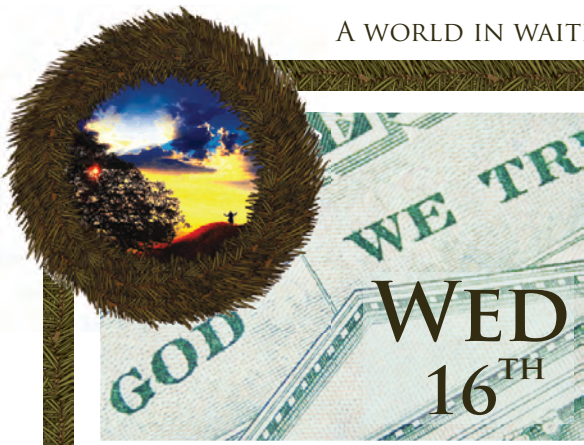
Philippians 4:4-7

sex, adventure – are too strong. Nor, therefore, does the solution consist simply in attempts to subdue and control our appetites. That is a too crudely mechanical view of human striving. It implies that the answer is in ourselves. But surely the ultimate answer – obvious when one thinks of it – is to find what we are looking for. We need to look not at what is driving us but for what is – or is not – drawing us. The reason why our very healthy and good appetites and desires may appear insatiable is that they have not found the right object and hence the right way of resting in the enjoyment of that object. One of the earliest and most moving accounts of this story of desire was written sixteen centuries ago by Augustine of Hippo, in his *Confessions*.

In the search for the good, our materialistic culture ends up by producing frustration rather than satisfaction. It first arouses our appetites, promises fulfillment, but then provides only pseudo-satisfaction in the form of the products and activities it is marketing. It leads us in the wrong direction. The whole point of such marketing is precisely not to satisfy us but to keep us coming back to purchase more.

But the fact that we let ourselves be misled by such forms of advertising and commercialisation is not just the fault of the advertisers. It is due to something deeper – a cultural vacuum, which is also a spiritual vacuum.

A good part of that vacuum is the fruit of a spirit of individualism which seeks expression in the claiming of rights rather than in the unfolding of the good. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* published earlier this year, pointed this out: 'A link has often been noted between claims to a "right to excess", and even to transgression and vice, within affluent societies, and the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction and elementary health care in areas of the underdeveloped world and on the outskirts of large metropolitan centres. The link consists in this: individual rights, when detached from a framework



of duties which grants them their full meaning, can run wild, leading to an escalation of demands which is effectively unlimited and indiscriminate. An overemphasis on rights leads to a disregard for duties. Duties set a limit on rights because they point to the anthropological and ethical framework of which rights are a part, in this way ensuring that they do not become licence. Duties thereby reinforce rights and call for their defence and promotion as a task to be undertaken in the service of the common good.'

The alternative to a society based on individualistic rights and responsibilities need not be one which is based on conformity and convention to a uniform code of behaviour. A richer alternative is a society based on a plurality of approaches to a common good, in which there is a shared concern to debate, discover, affirm and pursue what is good, not just whose rights take precedence. That would mean putting the economy in its place. How? Not by subordinating economic life to the dictates of the state, but by integrating the economy in a broader cultural world where it can be grounded in relationships which allow for creativity, collaboration and sharing in the enjoyment of our labour.

Somehow the perverse view has taken hold that the way to happiness is by the release of our impulses – physical or spiritual – and that attempts to let these be transformed by experiences of the good, the true and the beautiful are really only 'sublimation' and

substitute gratification. Such a view says more about its proponents than about the true nature of our desires.

What then about excess? Must we seek to banish excess? Paradoxically, no. For as we experience more deeply what we know to be good – which is ultimately rooted in the superabundance of God's overflowing love and grace – we will discover a new and different kind of excess, an excess that comes not from emptiness but from fullness. It was experienced by the mystics who experienced this sense of being overwhelmed – and consumed by, not consuming – the overflowing love of God. It was expressed in Baroque architecture and music which, whatever one's taste, was a sign not of greed but of an exuberance of joy.

There is more, not less, to life than we imagine.

## ACTION

### What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Green New Deal  
[http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z\\_sys\\_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=258](http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=258)

The 'Green Stimulus' called for by Lord Stern  
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/granthamInstitute/publications/An%20outline%20of%20the%20case%20for%20a%20%27green%27%20stimulus.pdf>



## DANCING FOR JOY

Zephaniah 3:14-20

‘God will exult over you with loud singing’  
(Zephaniah 3:17).

What a marvellous image. The Hebrew words are more wonderful still – *giyl/gheel* meaning to spin around under the influence of a strong emotion of joy or terror, and *rinnah/rinnaw* – meaning a shriek whether of gladness or grief. God spinning round over you with shrieks of delight! So that’s what God is like. Not the unfeeling legislator, nor the stern patriarchal figure but a lover, who not only protects his people but one who takes delight in a people described at times as a spouse and here as a daughter (Zephaniah 3:14).

This joyful passage comes only at the end of Zephaniah’s prophecies and is in stark contrast with the rest of his message. So strange is it to find this passage in the threatening book of Zephaniah that some have argued that it must have been added later, by someone else, perhaps feeling that the doom and gloom was too much to bear and that what was needed was a bit of lightness.

But increasingly it has come to be recognised that this exultant image could well have had a basis in particular events in Zephaniah’s own lifetime. It seems clear that the passage has a liturgical character and it is quite possible that it relates to a popular celebration – perhaps the Passover festival which followed the discovery of the book of Deuteronomy which had been buried. That discovery was a source of overwhelming

joy: ‘The singers were in their places...No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel’ (II Chronicles 35:15, 18).

It’s true that dancing was not unique to Israelite worship. It was common in pagan cults and Dionysian rituals. But spot the difference. Here the joyful dancing is not a sign of orgiastic excess or the worship of a god of wine. It is about the restoring of the bond between God and the people. It’s not about kings and priests: ‘I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones’ (Zephaniah 3:11).

Instead, it’s about the wounded and rejected: ‘I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth’ (Zephaniah 3:19).

Nor is it about grand institutions and power. No, it’s about fidelity and justice. And it’s only partly about the future (Zephaniah 3:20). It’s also about now, for the love is real.

As the Advent carol has it:

‘Tomorrow shall be my dancing day:  
I would my true love did so chance  
To see the legend of my play,  
To call my true love to my dance:  
Sing O my love, O my love, my love, my love:  
This have I done for my true love’