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Ten very good things 8: Growth [1]

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Although some people look out from their centrally heated balconies, with their bathroom cabinets full of modern medications, and their refrigerators full of well- preserved nourishing foods, and affect to despise growth, growth fills life with more opportunities, not just material ones. It is good thing number eight.

8. Growth

There is a certain temperament which dislikes progress because it is emblematic of change and struggle. They share the Elysian dream of Tennyson's Lotos Eaters for peace and contentment: "Is there any peace in ever climbing up the climbing wave?"

Such people disdain economic growth and advocate instead a contented life which does not seek to improve its lot. In fact some important studies on happiness suggest that it comes with the prospect of improvement rather than with a comfortable standard of living.

Adam Smith spoke of "The uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition," and it applies equally to women. People are motivated to better their lot, and it is partly from this drive that large numbers of us do not now live near starvation and at the mercy of bad harvests and crop failures. We have learned how to generate surpluses that can tide us through bad times, and which can offer us greater opportunities than previous generations could conceive of.

We use wealth to invest in creating more wealth in the future. This is what economic growth is. It has enabled us to afford an improved diet, sanitation, clean water, education, healthcare, better transport, and has given us the means and the leisure to cultivate the arts.

There are those who say that enough is enough, without making clear why it is today's standard which is enough, rather than that of 50 years ago or of 50 years hence. Some suggest we are using up the Earth's resources, even though our ability to access new sources seems to increase faster than our use of them, which is why the price of most of them has fallen in real terms. Others suggest that we cannot produce sufficient energy to fuel more growth,even though recent technological innovation in gas extraction has increased the available reserves by decades, if not a century or more.

Growth means a higher standard of living. It means better and smarter goods and services. It means one generation having access to the choices that only the very rich of the previous generation could afford. Growth offers the chances of more leisure, of self-improvement, of raising the standards of education. It is what brings to millions the chance of a better life.

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