

[Common Error No. 39](#) [1]

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39. "Even though people are richer on average, they are no happier, so we should stop pursuing economic growth."

Surveys show roughly the same proportion of happy people as there were 20 years ago when standards of living were lower. From this Lord Layard and others conclude that economic growth does not bring happiness and that we should aim for a simpler, more equal society rather than for a wealthier one.

There are things that can be said about wealth brought by economic growth. It makes more opportunities available. At some levels it can remove unnecessary sources of unhappiness such as disease and starvation. It can make it easier to achieve goals, or to lead a more varied and fulfilling life.

Surveys about happiness also show that people say they are happier when they feel their circumstances are improving. They are less likely to profess happiness in a wealthy society that is static than in a less rich society which is advancing. It is the improvement which counts, not the actual level. Jefferson rightly pointed to "the pursuit of happiness" rather than to any given level of it.

Humans are not the sort to enjoy static contentment. They seek challenges and the thrill of achievement. The peaceful calm of the Lotos Eaters is not for them, and neither are the sheep-pen and the secure pasture. Those who think of happiness as needs satisfied fail to spot that those needs include challenge and change. Humans are aspirational, seeking much more than the provision of necessities. Better a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.

It is not up to economic commentators to say what levels of wealth and achievement people are to be allowed to make them happy enough. People themselves will determine the limits, if any. To achieve a society in which more people are happy, far from curbing economic growth, we will aim at one which affords its citizens opportunities for advancement.

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