

Johannes Hirata

I want to add a couple of remarks regarding (1) our narrative and (2) tactical considerations of how to best bring our message across.

Our narrative: It's about liberty and our freedom to choose. Our narrative will basically consist of (1) a diagnosis of the current situation and how we got here, (2) a vision of a desirable future and (3) ways to get from here to there (of course it will also have to include, on all levels, persuasive reasons why we should want to get there). I offer the following food for thought:

We should make the case that the currently prevalent belief that our economies need to grow to avoid disaster is a betrayal of our fundamental liberty to collectively choose the terms on which we want to live together. As I argued in my contribution to the Wellbeing & Happiness report, it would be very ironic if, despite our remarkable technological and intellectual progress throughout the centuries, our man-made economic system forced us to make our economies grow year after year and to have to accept an increase in work-related stress, in income inequality, in environmental degradation and other ills for the sake of maintaining current well-being. There can be no doubt that societies are worse off when they are forced to have economic growth than when they are free to choose whether economic growth should be part of their conception of truly good development. Perhaps the growth-advocates are actually right that, as things are now, a society that fails to have economic growth will be punished by the comparative logic of global competition. If that is so, however, we should make it our top priority to adjust the domain of the laws of competition and to reclaim our freedom to decide on our future, and we should rethink the political and economic arrangements and choices that are depriving us of the fundamental liberty to choose our common future. The GNH perspective can be understood as an ongoing endeavor with exactly this objective.

I disagree with the diagnosis that the main cause of our growth-obsession is consumerism in the sense of an irrational and ideological desire for utterly superfluous consumption. I disagree even more with the analysis that consumption would stall if it were not driven by big business. There may have been concerted efforts to incite consumption in the US, as described by Bill Rees, and mindless consumption may be a correct description for a small minority of consumers in Europe and other places. But for the majority of wealthy Western countries and their populations, the desire for ever more income and consumption is driven by a sometimes thoughtless, but generally innocent and understandable desire to live a good life, to take good care of one's children, and to avoid financial distress after retirement. From my friends and acquaintances and from my own experience I can testify that even the most reflected individuals are happy about every pay rise and find many sensible ways to spend their money, even if they earn more than the German average salary. What I want to say is that we should not demonize the people (which would include most of ourselves) who consume at a level that would have appeared to be outrageous some decades ago (and still does from the perspective of low-income countries), but today is just a matter of being an accepted member of society. I'm not saying that there is not also greed and unjustifiable materialism out there, but even without that we would be observing unsustainable consumption levels.

When talking about our vision, we should avoid phrases like "happiness for all" that reflect – or can reflect – the naïvely harmonious idea that it is somehow possible to

align the interests of all human beings, let alone of all sentient beings, and to eradicate injustice. This will clearly never happen for several reasons: Diversity of cultures and interests, which in itself and to a certain degree is desirable, will also lead to conflicts between groups; even within rather homogeneous groups, people will compete for the same limited resources (job positions, real estate, even spouses), and this will result in winners and losers, not all of whom will come to terms with their loss; there will always be injustice because justice is always controversial; there will always be some people with outright antisocial behavior. If we talk of “happiness for all”, this may lead us down a wrong path of potentially dangerous utopian thinking, and even if it does not, it will make us vulnerable to critique from the outside that we are naïve.

As a corollary, we should make sure that the New Development Paradigm emphasizes justice (not only distributional justice, but in the sense of respect for individuals’ moral rights) as a fundamental prerequisite for the promotion of well-being. People will often disagree what well-being actually is, and it is crucial that those disagreements are dealt with in a just way, respecting fundamental liberties and ensuring just procedure (good governance).

Tactical considerations: We should not try to come up with a blueprint for a new economic system with specific prescriptions of how it should be designed. For one thing, this would mean overestimating our ability to understand complex systems, and any such blueprint will most likely be full of flaws and result in a multitude of unforeseen problems. For another thing, to be realistic, we must not start on the assumption that international cooperation will be possible in the near future. Instead, we should go for a piecemeal approach, starting with propositions that do not depend on full international cooperation and the risks of which are rather limited. This does not mean that we should not also draw a vision of a desirable future, but we should not pretend we can know how a desirable future can look in all details and how exactly we can get there.

We should always try to address multiple audiences at the same time, but differentially. For example, when making proposals what governments can do to tackle GHG emissions, we should at the same time talk about complementary changes of corporate strategies and of individual attitudes and behavior.

We should make sure to preserve the distinctly Bhutanese approach of GNH, in particular the inclusion of inner development as complementary to the creation of sustainable living conditions.