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Cambridge Union, February 1, 2024, “This House Believes You Can Put a Number on a Human Life”

1. If this house believes “you can put a number on a human life,” then it is perfectly in sync with the spirit of the age. Number-crunching is a foundational activity of our growth-oriented, liberal-capitalist societies. The main recourse of politicians and civil servants in the face of social plight and ecological crisis is the quantitative tools of neoclassically-based economics. The economy, untethered to ethical ideals or ecological bounds, thus serves as the measure of right and life. Even self-avowed “environmental” and “gender” economists shy away from questions about whether existing socioeconomic systems’ core dynamics are inimical to their aims. This crowds out crucial distinctions between rational and irrational economic activity, with calamitous effects for masses of people, and for the planet.

2. Too many of us have succumbed to a scientistic world-picture that makes such social intervention by the numbers seem plausible. “We have,” as philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch once observed, “suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary.” Having surrendered “our sense of form and structure in [moral and political] life,” Murdoch continues, we lack respect for “difficulties of knowing [the world].” No longer recognizing that social understanding calls for hard-fought historical and cultural perspectives, we have allowed “[t]he connection between art and the moral life” to languish. We have trivialized artistic works, as commodities or mere entertainment, and so abandoned our best hopes of being jolted back into acknowledgement of who we are.

3. Today it seems quaint to propose to nourish minds on works of literature. Such as, to mention one, W.G. Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz*, which recounts the life of Jacques Austerlitz, brought at age four on a *Kindertransport* from Prague to London, and then adopted by a stern Welsh couple, who told him nothing about his origins. A lifetime later, upon retirement, Austerlitz researches his early childhood, traces his family to Prague, and uncovers facts about how his Jewish mother was interred by the Nazis, deported to Theresienstadt, and murdered. He meets his one-time babysitter, now an elderly woman. Hearing her start to count in Czech, he realizes he can count with her.

Sebald’s narrative places imaginative demands on us like those imposed by efforts to register analogously grievous real-world harms. It also brings out that dealing in numbers is part of life, not a bedrock on which life rests. In a late passage, Austerlitz stops at a train station *en route* to Theresienstadt and is struck by the idea that the “railway lines [run] away into infinity.” That is an image, well-known from Wittgenstein’s philosophy, of the kind of rigidity numbers seem to have when reified, and here we are invited to connect the image with horrors of the Holocaust. We are invited to register numbers’ tendency, when boundlessly empowered, to obliterate fundamental values.

4. The lesson is largely lost on us. Deluded by dreams of support from mathematical scaffolding, we sanction social reasoning grounded in economic calculations that embody the same distorting idealizations of behavior found in consequentialist moral theory. We trick ourselves into believing that canny investment is an apt model for all morally laudable social effort, and that the best way to head off social or ecological disaster is to get the most

moral bang for our buck. It is a soothing and most convenient outlook. It appears to justify social actors in cozying up to billionaires and centi-millionaires, and it gives the mega-wealthy moral cover for simply continuing their vast, damaging exercises of accumulation: Now they need only fund apparently philanthropic institutes filled with moral experts who attest that their largess makes them the biggest moral heroes of all time.

This is all happening. We live in a world in which capital-fueled, growthist, and neoliberal Transhumanists, Extropians, and Rationalists have morphed into Effective Altruists and Longtermists, who try to impress us with balance sheets alleging to show much ‘good’ they have done but who tell us little about how their top-down projects undermine grassroots activism and destabilize political systems that could furnish more resilient good outcomes as expressions of democratic will. They also tell us little about where their money comes from or about how, in using it, they strengthen financial systems that are most responsible for the suffering they claim to alleviate. And they tell us little about how they are, ideologically, but a hair’s breadth away the Cosmists, Effective Accelerationists, and Singularitarians rushing to build AGI, digitize consciousness, and colonize Mars. But the rest of us should notice these things. We should follow the money and notice that the players in these elite circles are patting each other on the back and riding together into the sunset....

5. Except that it’s not a sunset but Earth on fire, blazing in the devastation of her Sixth Great Extinction. It’s not difficult to identify the profit-driven, industrial activities that fuel the conflagration. And the bankruptcy of the system of moral accounting that provides an ideological cloak for these activities’ perpetuation has repeatedly been exposed in social theory, literature, and philosophy. Yet most of us abide in the collective illusion that well-planned tweaks to the global economy will solve our problems and enable us to continue with business-as-usual under the guise of eternal green growth.

6. There are, of course, exceptions. Youth activists, Indigenous leaders, and others committed to anti-colonialist and feminist struggle see through the numbers and, in the name of climate justice, protest the fixation on market-based approaches to our problems.

Paradoxical as it may seem, many of the ultra-rich are also exceptions. Even as they ramp up their destructive enterprises, they are creating markets in climate analytics that commodify environmental science, and they are using their privileged access to the information we all need to adapt for building private bunkers so that they, their families, and friends can survive what they sometimes call simply “the event.” However responsible they are for precipitating the apocalyptic storms they hope to weather, and however fiercely they fight to preserve the status quo, they see where the status quo leads.

7. If you want to bring on the dystopias that the most affluent among us are simultaneously hastening and preparing to withstand, then, by all means, go on pouring human lives into equations of accumulation. If, however, you prefer to dedicate your time and energy to preserving the possibility of a more just and livable future for all, then you must conclude that, no, you cannot—or, rather, must not—treat human life as a numbers game.

*Acknowledgements. The citations from Iris Murdoch in these remarks are all from Murdoch’s 1961 essay “Against Dryness.” The remarks reflect conversations, over several decades, with Jay Bernstein and Cora Diamond, as well as more recent conversations with Carol Adams, Lori Gruen, Amia Srinivasan, and Émile Torres.*