

## Critical Reflections on Claar and Forster’s *The Keynesian Revolution and Our Empty Economy*

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### Introduction

“Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.”

– John M. Keynes

These words of Lord Keynes could not be more true than they are today. In fact, Victor Claar and Greg Forster demonstrate in *The Keynesian Revolution and Our Empty Economy: We’re All Dead* (henceforth *KREE*) that the words are true not just for Keynes himself and for “practical [people],” but for economic intellectuals who have been uncritically influenced by Keynes.

In this essay, however, I want to push this idea of uncritical, intellectual influence back towards the book itself. While I came to *KREE* as a dual-career theologian and economist, there ended up being less to reflect on within these areas and more to reflect on with regards to intellectual history and authorial perspective. There was plenty to commend. The book’s topic is timely and important, and I was particularly edified by (a) the initial discussion about the delusion of economics being an ethically “neutral” discipline, and (b) how Keynesian anthropology, especially paired with overt central planning, is a recipe for social disaster (i.e. totalitarianism). There were also sub-themes and arguments that proved both compelling and particularly relevant to current economic struggles and debates over theory. But what I also arrived at was *a series of concerns surrounding the way in which the various arguments*

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*and narratives are framed* – indeed, how the authors of *KREE* appear to be working on borrowed (and subprime) intellectual capital. These concerns include: (1) a significant degree of needless and highly disputable opinions, overgeneralizations, category issues, and other informal fallacies; (2) sophomoric/underdeveloped philosophizing; (3) obfuscations about historical and intellectual influence, the relationships of theory to practice, reductionist reasoning, and the meaning of “western civilization.” When viewed separately, these issues may seem insignificant. When combined, however – along with considerable counter-evidence – readers of *KREE* may fail to see the overall picture as compelling. And that’s my primary concern: not so much the validity of the conclusions, but of the premises, and how well the whole thing hangs together.

Because these reflections are critical, it is important for readers (especially the authors) to realize the inherent risk of this approach – namely, that it might suggest that I have only negative things to say about *KREE*. This would be a mistake. Most of my concerns do not affect some of the book’s central (and valid) theses.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is my hope that this constructive criticism will better advance those theses in the long-run (no pun intended). So the hazards of this one-sided perspective – mostly due to space constraints and “for the sake of the argument” – should be kept in mind.

### **Thick Opinion and Overgeneralizations**

For an argumentative and academic monograph, *KREE* exhibits an unusual amount of overgeneralizations and thick opinionation. This tends to weaken instead of strengthen the authors’ case.

For example, readers are told: “Almost nothing is more debilitating in the life of a nation than a pervasive moral anxiety. Wars and disasters may be catastrophic in the short term, but a persistent moral anxiety robs people of dignity and meaning” (pp. 4-5). But, the opposite could easily be argued – that wars and disasters have uniquely long-term effects (e.g. generational trauma) that lead to precisely the same kind of loss of meaning that the authors describe. Similarly, we read:

That such projects of transcendent value have been getting more and more rare over the last century ... the Keynesian Revolution... [has] transformed the political and cultural landscape in ways that make such projects seem inherently implausible. Indeed, things

now run so strongly in the other direction that presidents respond to major, traumatic national emergencies by urging people to go shopping for their country (p. 218).

This is a dubious argument based on perception and select anecdotes.<sup>2</sup> When others observe the world, they see an age of fanatical nationalisms, Greta Thunberg and climate change, Mars One and ever increasing space exploration, exponential artificial intelligence, endless video games and movies playing apocalyptic themes, Greek mythology, and pre-human alien life – all of which are “projects of transcendent value” (if there ever was such a thing).<sup>3</sup>

Another example occurs in such paragraphs as this one:

In the classical view, dignity was conferred upon each individual by their social role, but in the Christian view dignity is intrinsic to human nature. A person’s dignity does not vary by or depend upon their social role; on the contrary, social roles must conform to the dignity of the human person rather than vice versa. And where the classical view distributed dignity unequally, Christianity declares all human beings to be of equal dignity. The king may have more power and authority than the subject, but not more human dignity. (p. 283)

As in other parts of the book, the authors simplify for brevity. But because of so many qualifications and exceptions to this type of abstraction/generalization (e.g. “the Christian view,” “the classical view,” etc.), one begins to question their legitimacy. Does “the Christian view,” for instance, exist in any time or place in the above example of human dignity? The early church and western Christendom don’t really qualify – with a long string of privileged classes and slaveries across the centuries and nations, and kingships functionally demonstrating greater/lesser dignities.<sup>4</sup> Still today, the Roman Catholic Church (along with countless Protestant institutions) forbids all non-male and non-heterosexual persons from being ordained, and/or members, married, or whatever the strictures of the current situation. Regarding political authority and human dignity, the current US president – with mass support from evangelical Christians – has made it clear that American citizens have more dignity than (for example) Hispanic children at the Southern border. Especially when general references to “Christianity” in *KREE* almost

always refers to western Christendom, these types of broad assertions remain theoretical, if not problematic.<sup>5</sup>

### Compared to What?

In reading *KREE*, I found myself frequently asking the question “Compared to what?”—sometimes at key themes. Consider the contrast between today’s meaningless labor to pre-Keynesian meaningful labor:

As hollow prosperity grows, we become increasingly aware that something is missing—for example, that we must acknowledge some higher purpose in our work besides the paycheck. Yet generations of moral indifference and deformation in economics has left us without categories for thinking, speaking, and acting about this problem. Unable to do anything, or even to articulate our concerns clearly, we are paralyzed. Hence, the feeling that we are losing our grip on the world where such things used to matter. (p. 11, cf. p. 15)

As other portions of *KREE* argue, labor in a Keynesian economy is largely meaningless (being focused on money and consumption), while pre-Keynesian economies are meaningful (being focused on transcendent values and having teleology). But here we must perform a reality check: *Are we really to believe that the average factory worker in Industrial England, muckraker in manorial Europe, or gladiator slave of second century Rome saw their labor as so much more meaningful and fulfilling than the average consumer sees their labor today?* This seems difficult to believe. Perhaps an adequate dose of teleology (or an oversupply in some cases!) doesn’t simply make work more meaningful.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, we read that “Smith was part of that bygone world in which people built things for higher purposes” (p. 217). Again, are so few things built today for “higher purposes”? And, how much of pre-Keynesian labor was for “higher purposes” versus for *survival*? “*But the amphitheatres, colosseum, the glorious cathedrals,*” one may reply, “*they were all built with robust teleology and a transcendent vision.*” How many of these projects were genuinely for higher purposes – and how many built for power and profit? (Does one simply ignore the role of indulgences in the construction of Saint Peter’s Basilica, and trust that it was all worth it because Teztel’s preaching was teleological?).<sup>7</sup> A less naïve reading of

western history frequently reveals central, toxic political and monetary agendas behind that “bygone world in which people built things for higher purposes.” The authors are right: there’s no going back (ch. 12). But why, then, frame so much of the argument in basically those terms?

### **On History, Western Civilization, and the Meaning of “Meaning”**

Indeed, similar to conservative authors, “the west” is generally portrayed in the terms of its own traditional mythology – inherently good, blessed, and inspiring, with a few hiccups. The regular grotesqueries from the last 3,000 years – national war-making, systemic oppression of women and marginalized groups in law, ritual, etc., anti-semitism, white supremacy, crusades, religious wars, heresy hunts and inquisitions, witch trials in Europe and the colonies, etc. – are undoubtedly objectionable to the authors but are generally not mentioned in *KREE* and do not shape its lengthy analysis of Keynesian culture vs. previous cultures. One exception is colonialism, but it is mostly just said to be “a wrong turn” (pp. 258ff) – suggesting that everything was otherwise “on track.” In any case, it appears outside the realm of possibility that such grotesqueries are *because* of “western values” instead of *despite* them.<sup>8</sup>

This is important to underscore not because anyone is in denial about bad things in western history or because the authors do not care or are ignorant about them, but because the general framework of the book is about the cultural and moral values that Keynesianism introduced and how they compare to previous value systems in cultural and intellectual history. If Keynesianism is a cancer to the West (and beyond), the significance of this (and its internal critique) can only be properly assessed when compared to other relevant moral and cultural cancers within that civilization. (And what if Keynesianism isn’t even a foreign disease but the natural outgrowth of the civilization in which it takes part?)

These are complicated issues that are difficult to properly unfold in a short essay, so I can only provide anecdotes that might illustrate the point. Thus, in one case, readers are told that “At least four basic observations about human nature have been central to western thought about economics all the way back to its earliest philosophers ... the moral value of work, property, exchange, and specialization” (pp. 25-27). One is again left asking: *According to whom and compared to what?* These ideas<sup>9</sup> certainly exist outside western literature, and it is debatable what

can be declared “central.”<sup>10</sup> And, we might also ask, why are these four chosen over other repeated themes and ideas in western reflections on economics<sup>11</sup> – like the importance of waging war, the benefits of plunder, the necessity of slaves, anthropological patriarchal essentialism and property use of women, which was codified in law and which formed the basis of both family and commercial activity until the modern period, etc.? Again, it’s not that I doubt the authors’ objections to or knowledge of such things, it’s the selectivity: they’re not viewed as relevant to a discussion on the moral systems of civilizations.

...in Europe the artistic modernists demanded government expansion and nationalization of cultural institutions ... In earlier periods, such massive state control of and/or collusion with businesses would have been rejected as a gross violation of the basic commitments of western civilization. This would have been especially true in America, where limitations on the state had been so central to the nation’s traditions of political identity and legitimacy. But the breakdown of moral authority left no one with the power to challenge the growth of the state and the politicization of the economy along with the rest of everyday life. (p. 84)

Again, these broad claims emerge from a peculiar logic and reading of history that favor the book’s presuppositions and conclusions. Crony-capitalism (collusion between government and business) has existed about as long as governments and business have (including at America’s founding)<sup>12</sup> – as have nationalized and/or government-controlled arts.<sup>13</sup> Ideas like “commitments of western civilization” are for all practical purposes (and despite recent apologetics),<sup>14</sup> a mythical abstraction and another overgeneralization.<sup>15</sup> And the growth of the state in the progressive era may have had less to do with “the breakdown of moral authority” and more to do with *alternative* moral authorities.<sup>16</sup> Or, perhaps it had little to do with moral authority at all, and more to do with the countless other variables that move and change societies.

*KREE’s* reading of history is also quite modern. For instance:

Smith treats work almost entirely in material terms, as a physical activity; the economic value of all commodities is, in turn, equal to the amount of physical exertion necessary to acquire them. This is in stark contrast to Christian thinkers, for whom

the transcendent factors of identity, motivation, and purpose are always more important than the physical factor in any activity. (p. 42)

This dualism between concrete experience and abstract ideas is not native to early Christian thought and practice. In fact, Christianity was known for being *distinctly focused on the physical and embodied*.<sup>17</sup> This was the scandal of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. If Christian thinkers wanted to contrast “the physical factor in any activity” from “the transcendent factors,” perhaps they (western intellectuals) were mistaken to do so.<sup>18</sup>

Other assertions are also dualistic or at least rigorously reductionist, such as “Human life is either transcendentally moral or utterly meaningless” (p. 235). Despite this radical existential claim, there is no real argument in *KREE* that non-transcendentally moral human life must be “utterly meaningless.”<sup>19</sup> This same problem re-appears in a somewhat tangential paragraph about video games:

Simulations are enjoyable because they are simpler and easier than the real thing (ask anyone who has actually had to fight Nazi soldiers) and there are no real stakes if you lose. Video games can be simpler and easier, and have no stakes, precisely because they are not real. But for the same reason, because they are not real, they are not meaningful. A life devoted to video games cannot produce the kind of deep satisfaction and moral confidence that real accomplishment provides. In the same way, economic life under the Consumption paradigm is morally unreal – hollow, empty. (p. 313)

While I agree that the consumption paradigm rings morally hollow, almost every sentence of this argument is problematic.<sup>20</sup> First and foremost, if the authors think conquering *FarCry 5* on *InFamous* difficulty is not an “accomplishment,” they clearly need to play more video games. Second (being more serious), the line between “real” and “not real” is superficial and is not always so clear,<sup>21</sup> and today is becoming more and more blurry.<sup>22</sup> These simplistic dichotomies also smack of Baconian common sense realism, betraying yet again the book’s (partial) reliance on an uncritical if not outdated epistemology. Third, in some cases the stakes in simulations *are* as “real” as betting on a horse race or gambling, to which countless evidences (including financial transactions and

cross-transferable digital in-game currencies) attest. Fourth, video games have had a dramatic impact on the lives of people, often (I would contend) for the worse.<sup>23</sup> How can something that is categorically “not real” facilitate divorce and possibly school shootings? In short, the “real” vs. “unreal” category is crass and unhelpful.

Gaming is so widely popular *precisely because* it provides meaning to those participants. And since value is subjective (as the Austrians would say), there is no reason, in principal, to object to this reality (yes, a “*reality*”). We may find this location of meaning, value, and purpose, to be lame and hollow *compared to alternatives*, but that’s not the argument being made here in *KREE* – which appears universal and absolutist. The authors of *KREE* appear to be reading into “reality” their own gloss of meaningfulness, such that anything at all in the world that might be universally, transcendently, or transculturally “meaningless” is an affront to their argument.

But, this need not be the case. As evolutionary creationists have rightly argued, “random” or “arbitrary” elements in life (or in a video game) can be both good and necessary.<sup>24</sup> God does not require human beings to be serious about life all the time, and assume that every event and state of affairs must be logically subsumed under some rationalized teleology; rest and recreation are often fueled by arbitrariness (e.g. cutting wood, playing pool, etc.).<sup>25</sup> And we can extend this to the events of history: some entire communities in our human past have fallen for no other reason than the weather or disease and others succeeded largely because they did not encounter such misfortune. Some superior moral systems do not survive, and inferior ones do.<sup>26</sup> And sometimes we have to accept that our worldview does not offer something meaningful for every event or series of events we witness.<sup>27</sup> The authors surely understand all this, but it cannot be squared with what the book is arguing.

### Questions about Central Theses

Three of my concerns address more central aspects of the book:

- (a) Is utilitarianism (as *KREE* defines it) so different from the Moral Consensus paradigm the book ultimately proposes?
- (b) Was Keynes genuinely and consistently disinterested in teleology beyond consumption, and the short term above the long term?

- (c) Was the Keynesian Revolution really a *Keynesian* Revolution, and not just a subset of a larger movement within academia and progressive epistemologies?

Regarding (a), we read that “Utilitarianism, as we have seen, strives to be normative without being teleological; it wants to be able to tell us what we ought to do with robust moral authority, while making as few claims as possible about what is intrinsically good” (p. 97). While I could imagine differences between them, I do not clearly see how this specific description is significantly inaccurate for the Moral Consensus paradigm outlined at the end of *KREE*. (Might this have implications?)

Regarding (b), Keynes is quoted as saying: “We shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful” (pp. 223-224). Claar and Forster cite this (and more) to make a point about “the Bloomsbury group elite, freeing themselves of attachment to materialistic greed, envy and vanity, simply enjoying life as it comes.” But this seems to miss the obvious language of teleology and intrinsic goods – precisely what Keynes is said not to care about. Elsewhere we read Keynes saying: “Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.” (p. 224). Keynes is clearly speaking of long-term phases of human existence, not the short run. And he also seems to suggest that his own consumerist model isn’t ultimately desirable. I’m probably missing something (I’m not a Keynes scholar), but doesn’t this contradict *KREE*’s portrayal of Keynes’ thought?

Regarding (c), *KREE* argues that Keynes inaugurated a moral revolution by reducing human beings to “bundles of appetites” (p. 300; cf. p. 235) and detaching morality from economics.<sup>28</sup> But, is this really any different from Modernism’s tendency of reductionism,<sup>29</sup> and the specialization of any modern discipline that claims and attempts to be “neutral”? It seems that Keynes was doing what others were doing – and thus falling victim to epistemological reductionism and compartmentalization.<sup>30</sup> A science, to be a science of any kind, has to have a subject matter and boundaries that are clearly defined. Furthermore, the social sciences have always strived to be “empirical” and “evidence-based,” which requires some degree of isolation from that which isn’t (e.g. religion, philosophy, morality, etc.). Keynes simply went “all the way” in these movements.<sup>31</sup> Maybe *KREE* has given Keynes too much credit: Keynes could

(should?) be thought of as *instrumental* more than *innovative*. In short, if one zooms out beyond the field of economics, the Keynesian revolution can be seen as one act in a larger epistemological revolution reaching its peak in the progressive era. I think the authors somewhat touch on this perspective – and it is, indeed, a matter of perspective. Whatever the case, this angle might re-frame the general contours of the discussion for new possibilities.

### Conclusion

Some of the above critical reflections may appear petty individually (because some are) but, cumulatively, they merit response. Others – namely those issues locating the general socio-historical frameworks of interpretation – have bigger implications.

Must any of these inadequacies undermine the chief theses of the book? That's for others (and time) to judge. I will say that, given the fanatically uncritical attitudes of many contemporary neoclassical economists and institutions towards Keynesianism, a dozen books like *KREE* might as well be written. Keynesianism truly is as morally bankrupt as it is economically bankrupt. My concern in this particular essay is for the *future of dialog on related subject matter*. Transdisciplinary studies are uniquely complicated but this conversation must move ahead with more clarity.

Thankfully, we have perhaps the first of additional, future salvos to break the soil and energize this important debate and intersection of disciplines. Will it – and should it – be interbred with “heterodox,” institutionalists, and “new economic” thinkers? Will the “Moral Consensus” paradigm persuade its primary audiences? Will governments ever actually listen to economists of *any* kind?

Only God knows. We're all dead in the end anyway.

### Endnotes

1. E.g. that Keynesianism facilitated a destructive culture of consumerism, and that sound economics cannot be absolutely isolated from ethics/morality.
2. Cf. p. 127: “He issued this high and noble summons to the American people because he was surrounded by economists urging him that

if he wanted to avoid economic catastrophe, he needed to keep the economy bustling with consumption. This is the triumph of the moral and social vision of John Maynard Keynes.” But how many *did* go out and shop? *This* would demonstrate the point being made – and it would help readers to distinguish between Keynes’ influence on the world of academic economics versus the lives of the common people (the latter of which, presumably, constitutes “our empty economy” of the subtitle). We should also recall that one of the first major shopping malls/department buildings in the western world (Le Bon Marché) opened about a half century before Keynes was even born.

3. Cf. p. 272: “Where is the next Los Angeles? We have the resources and the human and social capital to build three such cities from scratch over the course of a single generation, if we wanted to. With a little more time we could build one on the moon, if we wanted to. But we have been taught not to want to, by an economic paradigm that stunts our horizon of time.” I’m almost certain the authors have heard of Elon Musk, the mass inspiration he’s given to entrepreneurs, and the support his fans have given to his plans to colonize Mars.
4. This is not to suggest that a sound application of Christ’s teaching and embodied life does not severely question such hierarchies and inequalities. It certainly does. But this is generally not how *KREE* uses “Christianity.” We are here running up against the distance between the Christ event and institutional western “Christianity” – and the contradiction of its moralism (see Ellul, 2001). To its credit, *KREE* distinguishes between early, medieval and modern Christianity at some key junctures.
5. This cleavage between theory and reality is made acute on page 6: “The outwardly moralistic man – whether aristocratic gentleman or bourgeois shopkeeper – who would never acquire anything except by honest labor, never waste a penny on frivolities, and never touch a woman other than his wife but who nonetheless *lives for the sake of nothing higher than his own personal happiness* is as much a part of the problem as the most insidious crony capitalist. It is this sort of person, and not in the more obviously wicked crony capitalist, that the long-term problem lies.” I understand and agree with what the authors are saying here (a meaningless life is a long-term problem for society), but must nevertheless disagree as it is stated.

As I similarly iterated above about war and disaster, the actions of immoral people have long-term consequences that cannot be confined to the “short-run.” *KREE* seems to draw a contrast between (a) pre-modern society with inward wholeness and outward poverty, and (b) modern society with inward hollowness and outward prosperity, somewhat romanticizing (a). This broad distinction might have limited (and/or rhetorical) value, but this provisional narrative quickly breaks down.

6. Cf. p. 218: “Teleology is the key to the change. Where consumer appetite is the only intrinsic good, no work is intrinsically good. All work is reduced to merely an instrumental good, valuable only as a way to earn a paycheck for consumption. A society that structures its economy on a view that some things are intrinsically good will never have trouble finding good work worth doing ... a society that structures its economy without a teleology beyond consumer appetite will not view any work as good work worth doing. It only sees good paychecks worth earning.” But then why was there often *little or no* economic change when there *was* teleology in the past? One hates to sound so neoclassical, but more evidence might be of help here. In any case, the mere presence of teleology (just like the mere presence of “religion”) is not necessarily good in and of itself.
7. As I iterate below, one must realize that, at least in one sense, one person’s meaningful structure, symbol, or literary work is meaningless to another. Something as obscure as a rock in a desert can be a tribute to a deity’s faithfulness, and something as complex as the Bible can be meaningless to entire nations.
8. While *KREE* isn’t as uncritical as other portrayals, it still somewhat adopts the methodology of other similar works – which is (to put it crassly): if we see anything that looks bad in western history, we know that it wasn’t consistent with “its values” or a constituent part of its identity. And if we see anything good, it must be a constituent part of “western civilization’s commitments,” and we must always “fight” for them.
9. I don’t say “observations” because I don’t know what the authors mean by this; observations by whom? (By contemporary authors? The victors? White male professors at conservative schools?)
10. I say this fully aware of the countless works in western civilization apologetics (cited later on below). I wish there was time to flesh out examples for this important point.

11. Most of these features are a characteristic of “civilization” in general. For example, see Spielvogel (2020) and compare to, for example, Singh (2009), chs 1-3; Stein and Arnold (2010), sections I-II; Schirokauer, Brown, Lurie and Gay (2013), chs 1-2. They reflect more universal states of affairs emerging from human evolution and interaction in the world. As *KREE* itself goes on to (rightly) observe: “sloth was condemned as wrong, because it subtracts from the survival and thriving of the species. Not only do people own property, but they ought to do so – again, for the sake of survival and prosperity – and they ought to be good stewards of what they own.” Survival and anti-sloth attitudes are not distinctive western values.
12. See Ferling (2004), especially his discussion on the New World real-estate interests of the “founding fathers,” and the role their new government would play in protecting those interests. Crony-capitalism proper had perhaps its first major hey-day in “the west” during the period of tyrants in ancient Greece (600-500s BCE).
13. E.g. in Classical Greece and Hellenistic Empires, the state funded/ established many of its cultural institutions, such as religious sacrifices, games, plays, holidays and calendar organization, etc.
14. Most notably Gregg (2019) and Shapiro(2019). Cf. Woods (2012); Stark (2015); *Stark (2006)*, cited frequently in *KREE*; Stark (2009); Barzun (2000); Birzer (2019); Wilson (1996), etc. I am not asserting that *KREE* falls into this sub-genre.
15. Some such constructs are personified, such as “Medieval Christendom believed...” (p. 255) and “Christianity declares” (p. 283). Another problematic generalization about history is: “Because production and consumption are now empty categories, money becomes an end in itself” (p. 232). But, preoccupation with making money (e.g. gold coins and objects) has been a problem since the ancient world; numerous primary sources of the pre-modern West (and other civilizations) warn us about seeking money (and the power it bestows) as an end in and of itself. Coinage (and debates about coinage) in Chinese, Indian, and western civilizations predate the medieval period by more than a thousand years. Even within Europe and the United States, there are countless indicators of money becoming “an end in itself” in the hundred years before Keynes was born.
16. Ancient Egypt, Constantine’s empire, and the Third Reich were all firmly rooted in transcendent purpose, teleology, and authoritative, principled moral values.

17. McFague (1993), p. 14: “Christianity is the religion of the incarnation *par excellence*. Its earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment: from the incarnation (the Word made flesh) and Christology (Christ was fully human) to the eucharist (this is my body, this is my blood), the resurrection of the body, and the church (the Body of Christ, who is its head), Christianity has been a religion of the body.” Christians were also known for their unusual physical care for the vulnerable and sick – despite concerns for getting infected. See Kreider (2016), pp. 67-126.
18. On the error of contrasting immanence from transcendence, see the seminal work of Kathryn Tanner (2005) and the last third of Hübner (2018).
19. Perhaps it’s *less* meaningful, or meaningful on a *different dimension*, but “utterly meaningless”?
20. I’m also sparing the “OK, boomer,” which might be appropriate here. (I invite the authors’ just retaliation – and will unconditionally accept – a corresponding jab about hopeless millennials.) Honestly, though, would the authors say all the same things about professional sports, their own hobbies, or constructing supply-and-demand models that “only” reflect the “real world”?
21. Philosophers have typically pointed to dreams – some of which often seem “more real” than what is “real.”
22. If participation in a sex-doll/robot brothel (which are growing across the globe) is “not real” and has “no stakes,” and is therefore “meaningless,” what business would one have attaching moral significance to such activity? (Recent critics of non-heterosexual relationships have run into the same issue: if gay/lesbian sex isn’t real or possible, for example, how can it be said to be sexually immoral at the same time?) I use sexual ethics as examples here partly because it is frequently portrayed as a hallmark of western morality (e.g. permitting gay marriage in the United States has been endlessly labeled as iconic of “the decline of western civilization.”)
23. The empirical evidence is divided on this subject but I’ve heard enough from my spouse (a licensed psychotherapist) to reasonably believe that violent video games have negative impacts on children.
24. Pruijm (2012); Reeves (2016).
25. For the record: I’ve written and lectured about contemporary nihilism, the “doomer generation,” banker suicide, and the like.

Despite possibly overstating their case, I stand fully with the authors about the catastrophic need for greater meaning in life in current times, and I'm particularly glad the authors took all the risks they have in addressing this topic. Note, for example, some of the references in Appendix C of Hubner (2020) but, in particular, Hubner (2019).

26. This is true of products within free markets. (Almost everyone has an electric refrigerator even though gas fridges are superior in almost every way.) The most effective (or “fittest”) products do not always dominate history.
27. Cf. Wright (2020). Editorials in *Christianity Today*, *The Gospel Coalition*, and other venues of conservative evangelicalism quickly (and predictably) shot down this provocative essay.
28. “As we have seen, economics was studied as a moral and cultural system for over 2000 years in the paradigms of the classical, Christian, and Enlightenment eras. The moral worldview of each approach was embedded in the cultural systems of civilizations, shaping how money and power were used. The aspiration to detach economics from these moral and cultural foundations had been growing among economists for more than a century before Keynes...” (p. 195).
29. On this, see in particular the many works of Owen Barfield in conjunction with the Neocalvinist philosophical tradition (Dooyeweerd and Clouser).
30. Cf. Moltmann (2015). p. 185: “The modern world began with the rise of the exact sciences. The sciences became exact through the ‘reduction of science to mathematics’ (*reduction scientiae ad mathematicum*). The concern that guided perception was freedom from natural forces that were not understood, and the mastery over them. For Descartes, it was the concern to make the human being ‘the lord and possessor of nature’; for the devout Francis Bacon it was the restoration of the likeness to God by way of lordship over the earth (*dominum terrae*). How can power over nature be acquired through knowledge? Through the application of the old Roman method, *divide et impera* – ‘divide and rule.’ If natural formations are split up into their individual parts, and one perceives how they are put together and function, they can be ‘dominated,’ and a separate formation can be constructed from their individual parts.”

31. We might be reminded that the projection of economic study as a somewhat value-free discipline of empiricism and “common sense” has its roots as far back as William Petty.

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