KEYNES AND THE OTIUM OF THE MASSES

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Interviewer:	"What do you think Richard Nixon meant when he said "we're all Keynesians now"?"
J.K. Galbraith:	"Oh, nobody should interpret Nixon to the larger public. He probably didn't know himself"[1].

ABSTRACT: This paper presents a reinterpretation of Keynes' philosophical motivations, focussing on his essay "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren". Keynes' 1930 vision of the world a hundred years hence was not so much prediction as polemic. Keynes was sharply critical of our means-ends confusion in valuing the instrumental as if it had ultimate value. Less well understood is his belief that the government must play a role in educating the public's aesthetic sensibility if we are not to fall for this "Benthamite heresy". Keynes' humanistic motivations and his emphasis on public arts education are taken up here, with reference to the sorts of lives we live today and the sorts of lives that Keynes thought worth living. The failure of Keynes' vision to manifest itself is perhaps not so much an indictment of his speculative powers, but of our diminished sense of the value of cultural education.

KEYWORDS: Keynes; Philosophy of Education; Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE); History of Philosophy; Socialism

The task of interpreting Keynes to the larger public is a surprisingly difficult one. His name is bandied around endlessly, but it's not just Nixon who doesn't know what is meant by "Keynesian." To cite a glaring example, Keynes' name is often taken to be synonymous with countercyclical fiscal measures[2], yet Keynes was

[1] Interview with J.K. Galbraith, *Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy*, PBS, 2002.

[2] For example, an article in the IMF journal F&D has it that "Rather than seeing unbalanced government budgets as wrong, Keynes advocated so-called countercyclical fiscal policies that act against the direction of

hardly a major proponent of these (his *General Theory* is virtually silent on the topic) and actually saw them as typically ineffective[3]. But I am no economist. The Keynes I want to re-interpret here is the figure whose humanist values underlie and motivate the economic vision.

The English economy during the 1920s can hardly be described as "roaring", but when in 1928, Keynes presented a speech entitled "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren," few predicted how much worse things were about to get. When Keynes revised and extended the piece for publication in 1930, few could see a cure for what Keynes described as "the prevailing world depression"[4]. Keynes, on the other hand, saw that it was "only a temporary phase of maladjustment"[5]. It was in this gloom, so the story goes, that Keynes presented his vision of a golden age a hundred years hence.

Keynes' essay has been the subject of enormous scholarly attention[6]. The essay has been both lauded and faulted as a piece of vaticination. We are some years away from the essay's centenary, when its long-term predictions will reach maturity, yet whole volumes have already been dedicated to analyses of those predictions. One common focus has been Keynes' claim that we will substitute leisure for labour as we head towards a fifteen-hour working week.

However, Keynes' essay did not primarily serve a prophetic purpose but rather a polemical one. Keynes was no believer in historical inevitability, and wrote at length about the impossibility of accurate economic forecasting. As it happens, Keynes' concrete predictions about increases in standards of living which have largely borne out were based on two key qualifications which, to put it mildly, have not: "no important wars and no important increase in

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the business cycle." See: S. Jahan, A.S. Mahmud, C. Papageorgiou, "What is Keynesian Economics?", *Finance & Development,* vol. 51, no. 3, 2014. The idea has also been popularly promulgated that widespread use of countercyclical policy in responding to the GFC indicates that "Keynes is Back".

[3] For a brief survey of Keynes' criticism of countercyclical measures, see E.W. Fuller, "Was Keynes a Socialist?", *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 43, no. 6, 2019, pp. 1659-1660. For a much more extended discussion, see A.H. Meltzer, *Keynes's Monetary Theory: A Different Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1988.

[4] J.M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren", in *Collected Writings, Volume IX: Essays in Persuasion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 322.

[5] Ibid., p. 325.

[6] See for example the papers in Luigi Pecchi and Gustavo Piga (eds.), *Revisiting Keynes: Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,* MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008.

population"[7]. The UK population has increased by about 50% since 1930; meanwhile, the US population has more than doubled and the global population more than tripled. The wars and their severity hardly need enumerating.

We live in a place and period of remarkable affluence. If the burden of leisure is to be borne by any culture, it is by ours. Yet the tendency is towards longer hours and ever more febrile busyness. So where, we might ask, are the specialists in the "art of life"[8] that Keynes foresaw? Where is the otium of the masses?

Keynes' own work offers more fruitful answers to these questions that many of his critics writing in our time. We say that hindsight is always 20/20, but this is an illusion. We look back on history with its eyes, with its values.

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Let's get clear on the target of Keynes' polemic: Benthamism. Bentham famously argued that "prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry."[9] Value is solely derivative of utility, of what creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number. As Keynes points out, Bentham also gave an early articulation of *laissez-faire*, writing that "the request which agriculture, manufacturers, and commerce present to governments is as modest and reasonable as that which Diogenes made to Alexander: Stand out of my sunshine"[10]. Bentham tells us that interference is both "generally needless" and "generally pernicious"; his ideal of a minimal government agenda rested on the notion that the general good is best served by allowing people to pursue their individual ends.

Keynes was a critic of each of these Benthamite theses. Keynes not only criticised utilitarianism on the grounds that its calculus is incapable of realistic prediction, but rejected altogether its calculative conception of rationality. Further, Keynes recognised that man is not atomistic, and that a society is not merely an aggregate of parts, but a culture in which men develop and through which they get their values. Bentham wrote that "everybody can play at push-

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[7] J.M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren", op. cit., p. 326.
[8] Ibid., p. 328.
[9] Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, London, John and H.L. Hunt, 1825, p. 206.
[10] Quoted in J.M. Keynes, "The End of Laissez-Faire", in *Collected Writings, Volume IX: Essays in Persuasion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 279.

pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few." Keynes regarded this as a result of undereducation, and argued that government had a role in cultural enfranchisement by teaching people how to enjoy more discerning games. Keynes defended the "prejudice" of art's central place in the life of man. He did not do this by invoking a scale of so-called higher and lower pleasures. Rather, Keynes followed Moore's argument that "pleasure is not the only object of desire,"[11] that the value of pleasure is dependent on, not constitutive of, the good.

Keynes did not imagine the Benthamite "heresy" would be easy to overcome. He tells us that we have been "hag-ridden" by "pseudo-moral principles" for centuries; principles which invert the relationship of means and ends, and which exalt instrumentally useful vices as if they were innate virtues. It is not a painless matter to slough off such long-held values, and Keynes contemplated with "dread" the necessary period of readjustment. In fact, he thought it likely that technological unemployment would temporarily create societal "nervous breakdown"[12].

As an early indicator of this, Keynes pointed to breakdown amongst materially comfortable housewives in England and the States "who have been deprived by their wealth of their traditional tasks and occupations – who cannot find it sufficiently amusing, when deprived of the spur of economic necessity, to cook and clean and mend, yet are quite unable to find anything more amusing." In subsequent decades, addiction to tranquilisers (meprobamate, chlordiazepoxide, diazepam) popularly referred to as "Mother's Little Helpers" would become widespread in just these populations. Later, they would be the vanguard of synthetic opiate addiction.

Keynes wrote that "to judge from the behaviour and the achievements of the wealthy classes to-day in any quarter of the world, the outlook is very depressing!" Economic comfort has not lead to the pursuit of the good, but rather to anxiety, to what Kierkegaard called the "dizziness of freedom"[13]. That striving keeps one's eyes off the abyss has been long known. In the early fifth century, Jerome wrote that one should be constantly working "so that the devil may always find you

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[11] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Revised Edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 160.
[12] J.M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren", op. cit., p. 327.
[13] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. W. Lowrie, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, p. 55.

busy"[14].

Robinson Jeffers, a contemporary of Keynes, may have been right when he wrote:

> "If in some future civilization the dreams of Utopia should incredibly be realized, and men were actually freed from want and fear, then all the more they would need this sanctuary, against the deadly emptiness and insignificance of their lives, at leisure fully appreciated."[15]

Shortly before writing this, Jeffers wonders what men could do with their "excess energy":

> "We could take a walk, for instance, and admire landscape: that is better than killing one's brother in war or trying to be superior to one's neighbor in time of peace. We could dig our gardens; the occupation that seemed to Voltaire's man, after he had surveyed the world, least foolish. We could, according to our abilities, give ourselves to science and art; not to impress somebody, but for love of the beauty that each discloses. We could even be quiet occasionally... Well: do I really believe that people will be content to take a walk and admire the beauty of things? Certainly not."[16]

It hardly matters whether we call Jeffers a misanthrope or a realist[17], and Keynes a meliorist or a romantic. The two men clearly differ on this point. Unlike

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[14] Jerome, Select Letters of St. Jerome, trans. F.A. Wright, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 417.

[15] Robinson Jeffers, preface to The Double-Axe and Other Poems, Liveright, New York, 1977, p. 175.

[16] Ibid., p. 173.

[17] Jeffers' best claim to realism lies of course not in his American isolationism (by then wildly silly), but rather in his premature environmentalism. Allow me this bloated footnote to make a few remarks on Keynes on the interplay of economics and the environment. Keynes' economic plan post-WWII had, in his own words, a strongly "expansionist bias". The scheme of the American delegate at Bretton Woods, H.D. White, which is the one in effect eventually accepted, did not. See J.M. Keynes, Collected Writings, Volume XXV: Activities 1940-1944, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 225. Keynes was right that long-term expansionist pressure on world-trade is economically sustainable. But now we are aware that it is not environmentally sustainable. The idea that environmental health follows a Kuznets curve—whereby increased economic development at first worsens environmental degradation before reaching a turning point at which it improves—is no less wishful thinking for being frequently repeated. The countries with the most developed economies are the biggest per capita polluters. Their environments are generally relatively beautiful at the cost of enormous ugliness elsewhere. But perhaps the turn lies still further on? If so, it likely lies well beyond the tipping point at which it shall become inconsequential. While it is certainly a stretch to make Keynes out as a great environmentalist, he did criticise our willingness to "destroy the beauty of the countryside because the unappropriated splendours of nature have no economic value". See J.M. Keynes, "National Self-Sufficiency", in Collected Writings: Volume XXI: Activities 1931-1939, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 242. It is worth noting that this criticism works equally well against those who

Jeffers, Keynes does believe that man can be reformed and can find contentment in the pursuit of non-instrumental value. Elsewhere, he acknowledges that his view is predicated on a denial of "original sin"[18]—that man does not suffer from this corruption of means and ends innately but only accidentally. Keynes does acknowledge that there will be *some* "purposive men" whose instrumental orientation proves incurable. However such unregenerate climbers will no longer be exalted, but rather pitied as suffering from "a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease…"[19]

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Employing one of Bentham's own distinctions, Keynes sought to reconsider the bounds of the "Agenda" and the "Non-Agenda" of government. It has rarely been appreciated that the agenda Keynes developed was directed towards just this conversion from Benthamism. Approaching the close of his *General Theory*, Keynes writes:

> "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back…"[20]

Keynes was concerned to directly reach a non-specialist public, rather than rely on trickle-down ideology. He wrote and lectured for popular audiences. He sought to initiate significant policy reform. I want to focus here on his push for substantial government funding for the arts.

Keynes spoke of the widespread belief that it is "wicked for the state to spend a halfpenny on non-economic purposes", and how even spending on education

instrumentalise ecology, arguing for the preservation of 'natural resources' not because they are beautiful or ennobling, but because they allow us to go on going on.

[18] J.M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs", in Collected Works, Volume X: Essays in Biography, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 447.

[19] J.M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren", op. cit., p. 329.

[20] J.M. Keynes, Collected Works, Volume VII: The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money, p. 383.

and public health only get justified "on the ground that they 'pay'"[21]. Keynes on the contrary argued that not only should Treasury fund the sort of magnificent public architecture that dignifies lives, but also "circuses"—public ceremonies and so on—which allow the expression of "common feeling". Keynes argued that we should not regard these as "barbaric…, childish, and unworthy of serious citizens" but should see that man is an innately communal creature with real needs for collective experiences. As Democritus wrote in the fifth century BCE, "the life without festival is a long road without an inn"[22].

Keynes' view encompasses the populist but also the elitist. Rather, it holds to the romantic hope of raising the former to the latter. This can be seen clearly in his involvement in the London Artists' Association in the '20s–'30s, which guaranteed a living wage to emerging artists; and also in the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts in the '40s. Keynes said that the intention of CEMA, which would later become the Arts Council, was:

> "…to aid all those who pursue the highest standards of original composition and executive performance in all branches of the arts and to carry their work throughout the country, and to accustom the great new audiences which are springing up to expect and approve the best"[23].

Here again there is a recognition of the need for cultural cohesion. A culture needs not only great artists, but audiences capable of appreciating their works—the two are mutually supporting. CEMA was initially intended to financially support the arts in Britain through the austerities of the war, an end toward which it was very successful. But Keynes later reflected that CEMA and its successors came to offer something which had not existed in Britain even in times of peace—namely, a situation in which "the artist and the public can each sustain and live on the other in that union which has occasionally existed in the past at the great ages of a communal civilised life"[24].

Keynes wrote:

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[21] J.M. Keynes, "Art and the State", in Collected Works, Volume XXVIII: Social, Political and Literary Writings, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 342.

[22] Quoted in K. Freeman (ed. and trans.), Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 112.

[23] J.M. Keynes, "The Arts in War-Time", in Collected Works, Volume XXVIII: Social, Political and Literary Writings, op. cit., pp. 360-361.

[24] J.M. Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes", in ibid., p. 372.

> "We look forward to the time when the theatre and the concert-hall and the gallery will be a living element in everyone's upbringing, and regular attendance at the theatre and at concerts a part of organised education."

His view here differs from Nietzsche who saw high culture as a "pyramid" that can only rise from the "broad base" of a "strong and soundly consolidated mediocrity". But Keynes also differs from Trotsky who envisaged a future where "the average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx"[25]. Keynes' view does not commit himself to a crowd of exceptions, but it does show a strong belief in widespread human potential to flourish culturally. The view makes sense given Keynes' feeling for mass psychology, for "animal spirits": a collective atmosphere of cultural interest creates a higher centre of gravity that draws the public towards it. In such a cohesive cultural situation, there is not the *ressentiment* of artists towards a public that does not understand them, or of the public towards artists who refuse to be understood.

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For all their renaissance ambition, the practical upshot of Keynes' artistic policies has been criticised as favouring the "canonically didactic"[26]. There is some truth in this, but the nature of the didacticism should be clarified. Keynes did not conceive of the arts as instrumental to any other end than to teach people how to delight in the arts themselves. He writes "do not think of the Arts Council as a schoolmaster. Your enjoyment will be our first aim... In so far as we instruct, it is a new game we are teaching you to play."[27] There is a significant recognition here that cultural enjoyment is a skill, and a program to enfranchise more of the population by cultivating those skills.

Keynes believed that the art of living was a skill which could be taught. There are various ancient schools which sought to do so—for example, Stoic and Epicurean. Some seek to adjust individual to environment, others seek to adjust environment to individual. But they share a common focus: the present. They teach, as Keynes said, "how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well."[28]

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[25] L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. R. Strunsky, University of Michigan Press, 1960, p. 256.

[26] A.D. Keane, "Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes and art between the wars", *Philia*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2022, p. 58.

[27] J.M. Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes", op. cit., p. 369.

[28] J.M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren", op. cit., p. 331.

They also share a sense of the limited means required to enjoy the present—as Nietzsche said of Epicurus: "never before has voluptuousness been so modest". According to Pierre Hadot, "attention (*prosoche*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude"[29]. Seneca, for example, wrote that the wise man "does not plunge forward into the unknown, for he is happy with what he has [i.e., the present]. And don't believe that he is content with not very much, for what he has is everything"[30].

Keynes was also a strong supporter of the BBC – which he said has played "the predominant part" in creating public demand for "serious and fine entertainment" by making available to all "the possibility of learning these new games which only the few used to play, and by forming new tastes and habits and thus enlarging the desires of the listener and his capacity for enjoyment."[31] From Keynes' perspective, the BBC's benefit was to make the media capable of transmitting something other than the economic motive. It is not merely a matter of news without commercial biases, so that one isn't hearing the weather from the tour operators; it is also an utterly different way of looking at the audience. The dependence on advertising revenue leads to a survival of the brashest. Companies will only pay to have their marketing run during the most popular programming. Here the public are conceived of as *customers*, whose tastes are always right. Independence from these constraints allows for more edifying programming, where the public are conceived of as human beings capable of development. But of course the idea that "Auntie Knows Best" has long been a criticism of the BBC and its presumption to know what one needs.

Eye and ear can be trained, the senses quickened. But having the State involved in funding such training, even at arm's length and with explicitly liberal intention, raised significant concerns then and continues to do so today. The instruction of aesthetic taste strikes many as innately oppressive. These are the things worth attending to, and this is how to attend to them. But *which things*, *what mode of attention*, *whose canon*? To others, such an approach seems like a drag on genuine experimentation, preventing the *avant-garde* from running so far ahead that their vision cannot be shared.

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[29] P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. M. Chase, Blackwell, 1995 p. 84.
[30] Quoted in ibid., p. 228.
[31] J.M. Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes", op. cit., p. 369.

These are not trivial issues. But Keynes would rejoin that a *laissez-faire* approach will not result in widespread autodidacticism, but rather in intervention by those with no scruples about cultivating tastes for what they can provide at a profit. No profit-driven company wishes to encourage a market well-schooled in what Keynes calls the "art of life". They would be like shrinks who actually cured their patients: out of business. Instead, they are beholden to their share-holders to endlessly manufacture desire. Keynes wrote that "the desire for superiority may indeed be insatiable"[32] – that is, that relative needs, desire to overtake the Jones', create an endless consumer arms race. It is in the express interest of big business to fuel this insatiability, not to teach man to "live wisely and agreeably and well". Mazur, a partner at Lehman Brothers, wrote in 1928:

> "Human desires seem to have no limits. Food products may some day reach a point where people's appetites are satiated or oversatiated... But even when that day comes, there will be other wants and desires that are just as real—the satisfaction of which will still provide new sales opportunities. Give the world and his wife the funds with which to satisfy every need, desire, and whim, educate the world and his wife to want, and the productive capacity of the country will actually groan under the burden of the enormous demand. There may be limits to consumption of particular products. There is no theoretical limit to general consumption possibilities"[33].

In the same book, Mazur discusses the "community that can be trained to desire change, to want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed"[34]. He says that "if what [is] in style could be changed quickly enough and made soon obsolete," then a market of insatiable demand could be created. So it seems that we either educate taste or let the market "educate the world and his wife to want".

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The question of whether Keynes was a socialist has vexed scholars. I think the only honest answer to is an equivocal *yes but*. Keynes himself had no issue with the label[35]. Keynes described Gesell's *The Natural Economic Order* as intending "the

[32] J.M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren", op. cit., p. 326.
[33] P.M. Mazur, *American Prosperity: Its Causes and Consequences*, Viking Press, New York, 1928, pp. 224-225.
[34] Ibid., pp. 24-25.
[35] See E.W. Fuller, "Was Keynes a Socialist?", op. cit., esp. p. 1655f.

establishment of an anti-Marxian socialism"[36]. In a limited sense, the description is fitting of Keynes' own intentions.

Keynes' view here is perhaps best brought out by comparison with his great critic, Hayek. For Hayek, the sole unit of economic analysis is the individual. Hayek does not deny that something emerges from the parts – but it does so precisely to the extent that we don't interfere. Hayek extends Adam Smith's "invisible hand" argument, that an atomic individual left to pursue his own agenda serves "ends which were no part of his purpose"[37]. On such a view, the highest ends are served by not having any conscious pursuit of them. The public good, then, emerges from private responsibility.

Keynes disagrees with this even on the economic front, allowing for mass psychology ("animal spirits") to create economic moods. But his sense of communal experience goes far beyond economic justification.

Keynes was very clear that Communism was economically inefficient, and described Marxism as "the final *reductio ad absurdum* of Benthamism"[38]. He saw its popular appeal in its *religious* dimensions, above all its generation of public spirit. Modern capitalism, on the other hand, suffers from the "egotistic atomism of the irreligious".

In his commentary on the Stalin-Wells interview, Keynes writes that "Communism draws its strength from deeper, more serious sources" than economic ones:

> "Offered to us as a means of improving the economic situation, it is an insult to our intelligence. But offered as a means of making the economic situation worse, that is its subtle, its almost irresistible, attraction."[39]

This is not as ironical as it sounds. Keynes was, as he wrote to Hayek, prepared to make "economic sacrifices... in order to secure non-economic advantages"[40]. Keynes' interpretation of Soviet Communism has a good deal of plausibility: it was not the rationalising force it presented itself as, but rather "a

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[36] J.M. Keynes, *Collected Works, Volume VII: The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, op. cit., p. 355.

[37] See F.A. Hayek, *Individualism: True and False*, Hodges, Figgis & Co., Dublin, 1946, p. 14.

[38] J.M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs", op. cit., p. 446.

[39] J.M. Keynes, "Mr Keynes Replies to Shaw", in *Collected Works, Volume XXVIII: Social, Political and Literary Writings*, op. cit., p. 34.

[40] J.M. Keynes, letter to Hayek of 28 June 1944, in *Collected Writings, Volume XXVII: Activities 1940-1946*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 385-388.

protest against the emptiness of economic welfare, an appeal to the ascetic in us all to other values".

Keynes plainly believed in such values, and hence thought that there was good reason to protest. But there were clear limits to his sympathy. As he wrote of his visit to Russia in 1925, "there is much in Russia to make one pray that one's own country may achieve its goal not in that way". He had no desire for violent revolution and instead sought piecemeal economic reform. Keynes said in 1939:

> "The question is whether we are prepared to move out of the nineteenth-century laissez-faire state into an era of liberal socialism, by which I mean a system where we can act as an organised community for common purposes and to promote social and economic justice, whilst respecting and protecting the individual—his freedom of choice, his faith, his mind and its expression, his enterprise and his property."[41]

The ideal of liberal socialism is liable to sound oxymoronic. There are genuinely economically socialist aspects to Keynes thought. He believed in the government control over rates of investment (and not merely interest rates), for example, calling for a "socialisation of investment"[42]. But he was equally an economic liberal in that he neither opposed private wealth, nor saw economic inequality as an intrinsic evil.

Keynes once described the "political problem of mankind" as being to combine "Economic Efficiency, Social Justice, and Individual Liberty":

> "The first needs criticism, precaution, and technical knowledge; the second, an unselfish and enthusiastic spirit which loves the ordinary man; the third, tolerance, breadth, appreciation of the excellencies of variety and independence, which prefers, above everything, to give unhindered opportunity to the exceptional and to the aspiring. The second ingredient is the best possession of the great party of the Proletariat. But the first and third require the qualities of the party which, by its traditions and ancient sympathies, has been the home of Economic Individualism and Social Liberty"[43].

Because there are each of these elements in Keynes' thought, one can find in him what one will. One historian declares him "the last of the great English

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[41] J.M. Keynes, "Democracy and Efficiency", in *Collected Writings: Volume XXI: Activities 1931-1939*, op. cit., p. 500.
[42] J.M. Keynes, *Collected Works, Volume VII: The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money,* op. cit., p. 378.
[43] J.M. Keynes, "Liberalism and Labour", in *Collected Writings, Volume IX: Essays in Persuasion*, op. cit., p. 311.

Liberals"[44], for example; while others have found in him a "fellow traveller" of State socialism.

But Keynes was plain that the balance between these aspects was exceedingly important. Economic efficiency is best served by capitalism. But laissez-faire capitalism leads to enormous social inequality, and encourages individual liberty only in the negative sense. Keynes' view picks out both senses of liberty: the negative ("unhindered") but also the positive ("the exceptional and the aspiring"). Communism, on the other hand, stresses social equality, but with this comes not only economic inefficiency but crushed individual liberty (in both senses). As Nietzsche wrote, an emphasis on equality often becomes "a war on all that is rare, strange, privileged"[45]—in other words, on creativity.

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In an autobiographical piece, Keynes confessed that he suffers "incurably from attributing an unreal rationality to other people's feelings and behaviour (and doubtless to my own, too)"[46]. We can see both aspects of this in play in the "Grandchildren" essay in Keynes' discussion of a passage from Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*. In the novel, a tailor never collects his debts because he is entranced by their perpetual on-paper growth. Giving this passage an anti-Semitic reading (unless the tailor was a Babylonian or Sumerian?), Keynes writes:

> "Perhaps it is not an accident that the race which did most to bring the promise of immortality into the heart and essence of our religions has also done most for the principle of compound interest and particularly loves this most purposive of human institutions."[47]

Keynes' own rationality was on many occasions compromised when it comes to Judaism. He knew enough history not to need telling that the Jews did not develop the notion of interest on interest, and that many Jews became moneylenders to Christians because Canon law forbade Christians from lending money at an interest. Since no sensible person would lend money to a stranger without interest, Christians had to seek non-Christian lenders. Moreover, Jewish

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[44] R. Skidelsky, *Keynes: The Return of the Master, PublicAffairs*, New York, 2009, p. 157.
[45] F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1966, p. 139.
[46] J.M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs", op. cit., p. 448.
[47] J.M. Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren", op. cit., p. 330.

scripture puts little emphasis of an afterlife—there is no mention of it at all in the Torah. It is a far more this-worldly religion than the Pauline Christianity (which Nietzsche called "Platonism for the masses"[48]) that diverts attention away from the lilies of the field and fixes one's eyes on the unseen, where one's treasures will neither rust nor rot.

What of Keynes' overestimation of the rationality of others? Keynes saw the calculative tailor—the person whose "jam to-morrow" is always sweeter than his "jam to-day"—as likely to become the exception rather than the rule. Keynes thought this irrationality a product of miseducation, of the fact that "we have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy". But even in a society such as our own that is ostensibly hedonistic, we tend to behave like the story's creditor and debtor in one, chronically deferring our own enjoyment.

The very idea of rationality is typically cast in calculative economic terms. Prominent recent attempts to expose human *irrationality* (cognitive biases and so on) equally assume this model. But it is important to note that the rationality that Keynes overestimates in others is not economic rationality. Keynes realised that economic rationality is, when taken as an ultimate ideal, a model of utter irrationality.

According to Keynes, capitalism is "more efficient for attaining economic ends than any alternative system", but he also thought that it has "extremely objectionable" aspects[49]. Foremost amongst these is a tendency to mistake economic ends for final ends.

For Keynes, following Moore, it is rational to pursue *the good*. But what that is remains an open question. Thus, for calculative purposes, we replace the good with something expedient, something believed in some way to track it. But to mistake that expediency for what it was intended to track is to mistake means for ends, and it is precisely *this* irrationality that Keynes focuses upon.

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Aspects of Keynes' analysis sound a lot like Nietzsche, who in 1882 described the "breathless haste" with which Americans worked as infectious and "spreading

[48] F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, op. cit., p. 3 (translation modified).
[49] J.M. Keynes, "The End of Laissez-Faire", op. cit., p. 294.

a lack of spirituality like a blanket." Nietzsche's comments deserve quoting at some length:

> "Even now one is ashamed of resting, and prolonged reflection almost gives people a bad conscience. One thinks with a watch in one's hand, even as one eats one's midday meal while reading the latest news of the stock market; one lives as if one always "might miss out on something." "Rather do anything than nothing": this principle, too, is merely a string to throttle all culture and good taste… One no longer has time or energy for ceremonies, for being obliging in an indirect way, for *esprit* in conversation, and for any *otium* at all. Living in a constant chase after gain compels people to expend their spirit to the point of exhaustion in continual pretense and overreaching and anticipating others. Virtue has come to consist of doing something in less time than someone else… More and more, *work* enlists all good conscience on its side; the desire for joy already calls itself a "need to recuperate" and is beginning to be ashamed of itself. "One owes it to one's health"—that is what people say when they are caught on an excursion into the country. Soon we may well reach the point where people can no longer give in to the desire for a *vita contemplativa* (that is, taking a walk with ideas and friends) without self-contempt and a bad conscience."[50]

Here we see several of Keynes' views in germ. Leisure is not sin. Efficiency is not an intrinsic virtue. Time is not money. Culture is something beyond utility. Both of these atheists decried the absence of non-instrumental value, what Nietzsche called "spirituality" and what Keynes called "religious" or "ascetic" drives towards "the Ideal". But where Nietzsche prophesied decline, Keynes saw a hopeful future. There can be no question as to whose vision we inhabit.

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Keynes' worldview is more foreign to us today than it would have been in 1930. One reason for this is that the later half of the twentieth century did not see a diminution of the Benthamite "heresy", but rather its international spread. A major vector for that spread has been, as Nietzsche suggests, Americanisation.

Since Keynes' predictions were made, many European countries have indeed seen somewhat shorter working hours and longer vacations. Stiglitz writes:

> "Not only do Europeans work less today than Americans, but they also vacation more. The French take an average of seven weeks of vacation a year (including

[50] F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1974, pp. 258-260.

> holidays) while the Germans take close to eight. The average in the United States is four weeks."[51]

Americans, who have lower leave entitlements, do not tend to use all of it. Europeans do, but attitudes appear to be shifting towards the American example.

There is some resistance. At the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, the French government relaxed the workplace law which forbids eating lunch in the office. The law struck many as "irrational". However, several instrumental arguments can be made in its favour, including that communal lunches increase productivity, that social bonds relieve workplace tensions, and so on[52]. But utilitarian arguments for *joie de vivre* seem quite beside the point. In an interview, Bruegel makes the more fundamental observation that communal meals have non-instrumental value[53]. This is the art of living. Epicurus is quoted as having said that "to dine without friends is to live the life of a wolf or a lion".

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We are very remote from Keynes' aspiration of the concert hall being a "living element in everyone's upbringing". I recently attended a brilliant performance by Joseph Tawadros with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. Electrified, I walked out into the foyer at the intermission—and felt like I'd entered the mess hall of a nursing home. The youth were elsewhere, queued up overnight outside a shoe store. Economic welfare has risen, but cultural welfare has not. Literacy, too, is on the decline. It is not merely a question of bad conscience about spending hours with a book, but one of attentional inability. We are creating cultural equality at a diminished level of education, with everyone reduced to readers of marketing slogans and listeners of jingles.

There's a longer version of the story of Alexander the Great's encounter with Diogenes than the one which Bentham tells. In it, Diogenes invites Alexander to rest with him and enjoy the sun. Alexander declines, saying that he must conquer Persia: "And having done that?" "I will conquer the world." "And after that?" "I

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[51] J. Stiglitz, "Toward a General Theory of Consumerism: Reflections on Keynes's Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren", in L. Pecchi and G. Piga (eds.), *Revisiting Keynes*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 43.

[52] M. Bruegel, "Covid-19, Workday Lunch and the French Labor Code", *Food and Foodways*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2021.

[53] Interview with Gregory Warner, Rough Translation, NPR, 2022. Available at: https://www.npr.org/2022/06/07/1103566695/lunching-work-when-eating-at-your-desk-is-forbidden

will rest." "But why conquer the world to gain what you can have now?"

From a Keynesian perspective, the modern economic man is an anaemic Alexander, chronically evading the present along paths of least resistance. One must get the working week over with. A bolted meal at the keyboard. Thumbs tag team the touchscreen on the afternoon constitutional. Switch off in front of the television. Living must wait for the weekend. But then the weekend comes and the living must wait a little longer. There's so much window shopping to do, so many promised lands to scroll through. On and on we defer, until the salt has lost its savour.

Seneca wrote that "while we are waiting to live, life passes us by"[54]. But perhaps just this is our object. Nietzsche claimed that "all human arrangements are directed towards this end—that, through constant distraction of thinking, life may not be *felt*."[55]

Perhaps the confusion of means and ends is innate or even intended. Though we appear to be irrationally delaying the Great Leisure, perhaps this is not a mere accidental confusion of means and ends. The apparent goals could be mere pretexts for the means, and the true end the striving, the searching, the scrolling.

Perhaps. But we may never know whether Keynes was fundamentally mistaken about human nature, or whether he merely failed to adequately edify the animal spirits of the moment.

[54] Quoted in P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, op. cit., p. 268.

[55] F. Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator", trans. W. Arrowsmith, in *Unmodern Observations*, ed. W. Arrowsmith, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990, p. 191.