

Friday 6th July:

After the binge...the apocalypse?

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(Chair Phillip Adams)

According to the great utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham, public policy should 'Act so as to produce the greatest good for the greatest number.' Has this principle now become a perilous one, sponsoring high consumption at the risk of global degradation? Is the pursuit of the greatest good now urgently a matter of individuals having to make do with less stuff?

The way we live now is materially more pleasant for more people than has been the case at any time in the past. One can moan about moral and spiritual decline until the cows come home, but on any empirical measure, this is as good as it has been. Is it as good as it gets?

At a macro level, this is a debate about the plot of human (indeed of global) history. Are we in a long-running situation comedy where, however bad things look in the first twenty-seven minutes, human technological ingenuity always rides in at the end to save the day? Or are we in three quarters of the way through a tragedy wherein humankind has committed the hubris of over-reaching the set limits of the universe and is, unwittingly, about to be punished by angry gods?

This macro-plotting is horribly emotive and fundamentally undecidable (at least before it is too late). It can too easily sponsor hysteria rather than analysis. It maps individual temperament more reliably than it maps the facts.

So, it would be more useful for you to be relatively 'micro' in your approach. Please focus on the area(s) of science you know best and point to concrete evidence that we are engaged either on productive growth as usual, or on a binge that will end at least in tears, and possibly in the end of life as we have known it.