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Beyond Uneconomic Growth: Economics, Equity and the Ecological Predicament

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This book began, in the words of Joshua Farley, the volume's lead editor, as a 'Festschrift to honour the work of Herman Daly, one of the pioneers of ecological economics'. What materialised in print, however, is also a significant standalone treatise on the ecological and social fallacies of growth-centred economics, and an examination of how economic systems might be reoriented away from what the authors agree is the biophysical impossibility of perpetual growth in a finite world through the application of steady-state economics. The volume brings together many of the leading thinkers in ecological economics of the past three decades to synthesise Daly's contributions to understanding environment–economy relationships, why a steady state economy is essential for planetary survival, and how this might be achieved.

The book is divided into five main parts: the foundations for an ecological economy; changing economic and behavioural paradigms; shifting economies towards more socially and ethically defensible goals; institutions for a sustainable future; and the shape of a steady-state economy. The book concludes by reflecting on future challenges for ecological economics and the ethics of ecological citizenship. As an edited volume, the course of this exploration is enlivened, but also inevitably swayed, by the interests and perspectives of each contributor, ranging from Czech's engaging analysis of the contribution of professional society position statements in challenging the influence of 'big money' and political economy on stances towards steady-state economics or Vatn's equally humane analysis of how mainstream economic theory has propounded a gravity-defying rejection of, and inattention to, biophysical constraints on growth. The resulting book simultaneously surprises readers with diverse perspectives and challenges them to contemplate, from a variety of standpoints, the genesis, motivations and predicaments created by neoclassical economics.

Responding to this diversity and richness, my discussion of the volume takes the form of three critical questions intended to inform rather than to censure. First, does the book offer an accessible introduction to debates on ecological economics and the steady-state economy? Almost certainly not. It takes an agile and spirited mind to follow the authors' traverse through the philosophical, ethical, economic and political critiques of growth-centred economics and arguments for a steady-state economy. It delivers a jigsaw of ideas that necessarily entails overlaps and backtracking to ensure each chapter is reasonably self-contained, while also contributing to the progression and wider aims of the book, so some accompanying tutelage may well be needed to assist students in comprehending and making connections between concepts put forward by its contributors.

Second, does the volume provide a balanced appraisal of arguments for and against steady-state economics? Again, the answer to this question is probably not because although large tracts of the book are dedicated to examining neoclassical economics' treatment of ecological limits, these are written predominantly from Dalyist perspectives. As such, neoclassical pro-growth assumptions and assertions are analysed for the primary purpose of dismantling their logics and the book could perhaps be accused of disproportionate intellectual homogeneity. The central issue is that it straddles the dual ambitions of debating steady-state economics and paying tribute to Daly's contributions to understanding the ecological and social deficits of current economic systems. The former requires robust exchanges of views about the nature of economy and its relationship with the biosphere and the people economics purports to serve, whereas the latter slants the discussion more towards accolades and a singular viewpoint on the ethical and practical superiority of steady-state economics. Even to someone with natural sympathies towards ecological economics, the latter impulse feels somewhat domineering at times.

Third, does the book articulate a plausible and compelling vision of how to move from socially and environmentally destructive economic orientations and modes of organisation towards economies that prize environmental limits and equality? Certainly, some contributions seek to do this through proposals for wholesale re-scripting of the goals of economics, reforming tax systems, and Brown's concluding exploration of a distinctive ethic of ecological citizenship. Despite these attempts, some of the readings of human behaviour

nevertheless feel rather ethereal compared with the everyday realities of how individuals construct their needs and create motivations for politicians and business leaders to prioritise economic growth despite increasing evidence of its adverse and self-defeating consequences. For example, Gowdy's chapter on behavioural and neuro-economics offers, to my mind, interesting but rather mechanistic assessments of the factors driving human behaviour and suggests that these disciplines still have a way to travel (and more interdisciplinary dialogues to hold) before they really capture the complexity of individual reasoning underpinning consumptive behaviour.

These academic cautions aside, readers of this review should be in no doubt that this volume offers a captivating and authoritative synopsis of perspectives on the repercussions of growth-centred economics, and important arguments on why and in what ways humanity needs to reconsider its rather cavalier treatment of the planet before, returning to the words of Joshua Farley, 'nature's feedback loops force it upon us, perhaps catastrophically'. Summing up, this is an important book for universities' libraries, which provides an invaluable resource for those with an interest in how the idea of environmental limits remains pertinent to studies of sustainable development.

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