



Book Review of Michael Heumann, Contemporary Criticism of Growth from a Philosophy of Economics Perspective

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Economic growth, relativism, postmodernism, degrowth, materialism, subjectivism

Abstract

This is a book review of Dr. Michael Heumann, *Contemporary Criticism of Growth from a Philosophy of Economics Perspective: Reconstructing economic growth dynamics as the self-perpetuation of decoupled Cartesian thought* (German title: *Zeitgenössische Wachstumskritik aus wirtschaftsphilosophischer Perspektive: Zur Rekonstruktion der Wachstumsdynamik als Verselbständigung cartesischen Denkens*), Gloethics Theses Series No. 42, Geneva: Globethics Publications. <https://doi.org/10.58863/20.500.12424/4296664>

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1. Introduction

Those with an interest in economic growth are likely to be familiar with the arguments put forward by those who favour growth and those who are opposed to it. On the one hand, there are calls for an end to growth, as unlimited growth is seen to exhaust the planet and its finite resources, which could have a negative impact on our future. On the other hand, there are those who believe that growth is essential for future prosperity and the reduction of poverty. This is why they believe that growth is necessary.

Michael Heumann's book takes a critical look at the growth debate and, above all, at the intellectual foundations it contains. In the analysis of the topic, Heumann repeatedly manages to make seemingly familiar and convincing arguments from the debate appear strange and dubious which makes the reading highly interesting.

The book goes beyond simply presenting the existing discussion about growth and analysing its intellectual foundations. It also offers approaches for criticism and potential solutions. For anyone seeking a comprehensive understanding of the current debate on economic growth, this book is an essential reference.

The following section presents a brief overview of the structure and aims of the book, before moving on to present some central ideas and arguments. While these can be partially elucidated, a comprehensive examination is beyond the scope of this review. Finally, a critical evaluation of the work is provided.

2. Structure and aim of the book

This work aims to analyse the contemporary growth debate from an integrative perspective of a Philosophy of Economics. In this way, the intellectual foundations of the arguments within the growth debate are clarified and subjected to a critical analysis.

Heumann himself describes his aim as follows:

“ (...) [T]his book focuses on the critique of the intellectual foundations of today’s criticism of growth, meaning those premises that need to be presupposed epistemologically, ontologically, and ethically when we reflect upon today’s empirical phenomenon and the effects of economic growth. This emphasis includes not only an enlightened understanding of the positions adhering to what can be considered the imperative of growth, (...) but also and foremost of critical discussions of economic growth challenging, transforming, and/or normatively trying to overcome the growth imperative (...).

On the one hand, therefore, it is a critique of the current growth critique, but on the other, it is also a critical examination of the arguments of both proponents and opponents of growth. The author emphasises that he does not take sides in the debate, but rather seeks to critically reflect on the intellectual foundations of the debate.

Heumann begins his work by formulating a two-part hypothesis, which is analysed and substantiated throughout the rest of the book. He literally states:

“ (...) [T]he two-part single hypothesis (Hyp.) presented here states that the different versions of today’s growth criticism by and large all respectively cannot develop plausible alternatives to the prevailing growth imperative (Hyp. 1a). In accordance with that and beyond that, the different versions of growth criticism, including even the most radical rejections of the growth imperative, paradoxically turn out to also be constituting the actual growth dynamics that lies behind the existing and observable growth imperative (Hyp. 1b).

This effort is realised in a total of eight chapters on about 530 pages. The first chapter introduces the topic by presenting the current debate on economic growth and the related arguments. This chapter also presents the above-

mentioned two-part hypothesis and a rough outline of the approach. Chapters two and three deal with the historical and systematic foundations of the contemporary critique of growth. Here the debate is analysed both in its historical context and in terms of its systematic foundations. Chapter four contains the core analysis of growth from the perspective of a Philosophy of Economics, as here the central arguments of the growth critique are elaborated and linked to the previous findings. Chapter five describes the methodology used to critically analyse the arguments of the opponents and proponents of growth. The arguments are then evaluated in the sixth chapter, which brings together all the previous ideas and aims to confirm the hypotheses presented at the beginning. The work concludes with a (comparatively) short chapter on possible solutions and an outlook on open questions that require further work.

3. Historical and systematic foundations of contemporary criticism of growth

In his analysis of the contemporary critique of growth, Heumann employs an integrative approach of the Philosophy of Economics, which is reflected in two principles in the analysis. On the one hand, it is suggested that economics and philosophy are not separate spheres that follow different rationalities or in which different normative principles apply. Heumann refers here to the Integrative Economic Ethics of Ulrich (2008). On the other hand, the integrative approach can be seen in the way that, when analysing arguments against economic growth, both historical debates and current systematic arguments are taken into consideration and critically examined. Heumann suggests that the arguments put forward in antiquity had a completely different intellectual basis to those currently being debated, and were based on different metaphysical assumptions. For instance, economic growth was rejected by Aristotle (4th century BC) because of its tendency towards infinity, as it has no end point of its own.

In his systematic analysis, three factions in the current growth debate shaped by modernity and postmodernity are identified: (1) growth advocates (imperative of growth), (2) growth adaptationists (imperative of green / social growth), and (3) degrowth proponents / growth opponents (imperative of anti-growth). Heumann presents an interesting conclusion based on his analysis of these three factions. He suggests that they all appear to align with the quantified depiction and reduction of the growth problem (see hypothesis 1a). This finding is further explored, reviewed, and critically reflected upon in the further course of the work, where it is explained that this reduction actually constitutes the core of self-perpetuating growth dynamics (see hypothesis 1b).

4. Criticism of the growth critique

In this chapter, which forms the central part of the work, Heumann attempts to show which fundamental inconsistencies exist in the debate on economic growth and on which intellectual foundations these are based. The centrepiece of his argument is the work of the 17th century French philosopher Descartes, which, in his time, led to a re-ordering of the reality status of the subject and the objective world. Heumann notes that Descartes' findings have been interpreted in a way that could be considered reductionistic in the current debate (but not only there), which has led to a reversal of the hierarchy originally postulated by Descartes, in which the *res cogitans* formed the basis for the *res extensa*. The consequence of this misinterpretation is that the material world (*res extensa*) is placed above the thinking substance (*res cogitans*), which in turn subsequently becomes determined by the material world and loses its autonomy. Since the subject has lost its original position and is therefore no longer suitable for recognising and judging reality, something else must take its place: The material, the measurable, the calculable. In the current debate on economic growth, it seems that figures are the most reliable way to describe reality and provide certainty. In order to make this argument as clear as possible to the reader, Heumann presents Descartes' work in detail and then critiques what he considers to be a reductionist interpretation.

5. Analysis of the arguments of contemporary criticism of growth

After Heumann has presented his analytical framework for critical reflection on the arguments of the contemporary growth debate, he applies it to specific statements from the debate. In doing so, he attempts to demonstrate the specific points at which the connections he problematises emerge and the effects this has. As he claims in his hypothesis 1b, even those who oppose growth contribute to the growth dynamic in their arguments or are unable to offer any alternatives to growth. In analysing the arguments, Heumann primarily employs the method of *reductio ad absurdum* to identify the weaknesses in the argumentation and to substantiate his hypotheses.

If one follows the trajectory of his argument thus far, the work culminates in the paradoxical realisation that those who oppose economic growth in the current debate rely on the same intellectual foundations as those who advocate for growth and are therefore unable to propose a genuine alternative or critique of economic growth.

6. Possible solutions

After detailing all the necessary connections and problems in the contemporary growth debate and offering criticism, the book concludes with a discussion of various solutions and ways out of the problem described. Three possible approaches are presented, all of which essentially seek to transform the foundations of our thinking and place it on a different footing. In his explanations, Heumann focuses primarily on the third solution presented by him. In doing so, we should return to the original idea of reality as formulated by Descartes before the misinterpretation of this idea problematised by Heumann occurred. For this, the subject must once again form the primary reference to reality, which makes a contradiction-free critique of growth possible. However, Heumann does not provide a concrete elaboration of such a contradiction-free critique or theory of economic growth in this work. He concludes by stating that although this work is still

outstanding, the project can be implemented with the intellectual foundations described.

7. Critical evaluation of the book

Heumann's book offers a valuable contribution to a highly relevant debate that has been ongoing for several decades and that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The book does more than simply trace the arguments of the various factions in the economic growth debate and illuminate their intellectual foundations. It also manages to surprise and irritate the reader in a positive way in many places.

Heumann also demonstrates courage and independence in this work, as he challenges existing structures and explores new intellectual ground. This process often leads to the questioning and problematisation of seemingly familiar and clear connections, which can be uncomfortable but ultimately contributes to more enlightened thinking. The growth debate serves as an illustrative object in many instances, allowing a glimpse into the currently powerful intellectual foundations of postmodern societies. The criticism Heumann presents in his book can therefore be applied in its basic features to other areas, such as various social developments during the coronavirus pandemic.

The explanations in the various chapters are detailed and engaging, taking the reader on an intellectual journey that includes both historical and systematic arguments. The arguments presented in the text are not always immediately cognitive accessible and easily understandable. In some cases, providing more illustrative examples or simplifying the language used would have enhanced the text's readability and understanding. Nevertheless, the text effectively progresses and supports the initial hypotheses, building a logical sequence of arguments.

The book is recommended to anyone interested in the growth debate, in particular, and in examining the intellectual foundations of our thinking in general. Engaging with the book and its arguments does require time and considerable cognitive effort, but this is rewarded with a new perspective on

our thinking and reasoning that is unique within the contemporary growth debate.

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9. Short biography

Dr Dietrich Wagner is a research fellow and lecturer at the University of St.Gallen and the St.Gallen University of Teacher Education. His research interests lie in the development of transversal competences, with a particular focus on ethical competences. In addition to his research activities, Dietrich Wagner teaches various Bachelor's and Master's courses at the University of St.Gallen and in teacher training programmes at the St.Gallen University of Teacher Education.

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