

Interpretation

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It is easy to associate contemporary environmentalism with “Malthusianism.” The English clergyman Thomas Malthus’s famous idea that “population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio,” while “subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio,”¹ lurks behind the Paris Climate Agreement’s hard line of “holding the increase in global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels.”² The agreement reflects a desire to avoid a “Malthusian catastrophe,” a point of no return at which the accelerating negative effects of climate change overwhelm humanity’s ability to manage them.

In *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care*, Giorgos Kallis argues that this position indeed channels Malthusianism, but in a way that should make environmentalists uncomfortable. Malthus posits a scarce natural world that can never fully provide for unlimited, and unlimitable, human desires. While mainstream environmentalism implicitly adopts this position, so too does neoliberal economics, and Kallis argues that if the former continues down this line of reasoning it will lose out to the latter’s optimistic message. Instead, environmentalism should take the exact opposite approach: assume that the natural world is *unlimited* while limiting our own desires. This argument draws from Cornelius Castoriadis’s

¹ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798; repr., Bellingham, WA: Electronic Scholarly Publishing Project, 1998), 4.

² “Paris Agreement,” United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, December 12, 2015, accessed March 30, 2022, https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris_nov_2015/application/pdf/paris_agreement_english_.pdf.

distinction between “heteronomy—limits that we attribute to God or nature and that restrict our freedom—and autonomy, limits that we consciously set for ourselves” (6). Kallis argues for the latter, contending that individuals and societies should limit themselves as an exercise of freedom and to preserve a “safe space” for it (4), and he turns to the ancient Greeks for insight into how to accomplish this. *Limits* thus offers a critique of the undemocratic, survivalist character of contemporary environmentalism, and a defense of prudence and accepting tradeoffs. Its more philosophic arguments may not satisfy all readers, but this short book is nonetheless an original and worthwhile work of environmental political thought.

Kallis begins by examining Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). Although Malthus did view the planet as limited and ungenerous, Kallis argues he “discovered not natural limits but unlimited wants. Far from a prophet of doom, Malthus invoked doom so as to galvanize the pursuit of growth” (4). Malthus saw human population growth as the surest sign of a flourishing, happy country, where industriousness allows food production to match population growth as much as possible. Humans possess unlimited desires for food and sex, and having enough of the former inevitably leads them to indulge in the latter and produce more humans. To continually satisfy these desires is, for Malthus, the central project of politics. Food production will never keep up with consistent population growth, but countries must do their best, and indeed “Malthus was optimistic that population could grow in the long term without limits—with discipline, industry, and more food” (21).

Thus, Kallis argues, Malthus should be understood as a pro-growth thinker. The book next considers the adaptation of Malthus’s vision of unlimited human needs, in a world where there will never quite be enough, by economic theory. Economists have applied Malthusian scarcity to the resource of time, in addition to food, and they identify all kinds of human desires in addition to the two Malthus discusses, but their logic is the same. Kallis claims that Malthus and the economists “invent[ed]” scarcity and “naturalized and sacralized” growth that fights against it, in essence holding that their sciences rest on arbitrary assumptions made for the purposes of protecting elite, monied interests, and in Malthus’s case to promote the Christian imperative to be fruitful and multiply (36). Because Kallis stakes his own argument on the idea that nature is abundant, he does not draw attention to any benefits of the modern arts and sciences. To do so would be to imply that these practices are necessary to make up for the earth’s natural scarcity.

Environmentalism would seem to be a committed opponent of this Malthusianism, yet Kallis shows that it has adopted the same theoretical foundation. Or at least one strain of it has; Kallis focuses many of his critiques of environmentalism on one text, the *Limits to Growth* report prepared by the Club of Rome in 1972, which “inherited the logic of Malthus, with economy taking the place of population and resources that of food.” These resources are naturally finite, but, the report argued, “we could limit ourselves within the limits of resources and turn the crash into a smooth landing, maintaining the highest possible level of population and consumption” while controlling both through birth control on one hand and green technology on the other (44–45).

Kallis complains that this reduces environmentalism to “a sterile scientific dispute...of how growth can be sustained and for how long” (48). This approach fails by construing external physical conditions as “limits,” when in reality they are only facts onto which human beings impose goals and, by extension, construct their own limits. For instance, gravity “is a limit if you want to jump from the rooftop of a building and arrive on the ground intact. It is not if you want to commit suicide. And gravity is actually helpful if you want to throw down a ball” (59). Saying that we “have to,” say, keep carbon emissions under a certain level within a certain time frame obscures the fact that this is a limit only if we want to maintain a certain standard of living. The second half of the third chapter is the best part of the book, for here Kallis outlines the negative political effects of defining environmentalism according to objective, external, “scientific” standards. It turns environmentalism into a doomsaying, scolding endeavor, which will always lose out in public opinion to economists’ optimistic calls for mobilizing human industry. It easily morphs into hostility toward the developing world and promotes the hoarding of scarce resources. Perhaps worst of all, it squelches democratic debate about what kind of relationship with nature we want our regimes to have. Climate research provides useful data, but on its own it cannot provide a blueprint for political, or even personal, action.

What can? The fourth chapter turns to the ancient Greeks for advice on how to achieve a “culture of limits.” Here Kallis relies much more on interpretations of Greek culture by Castoriadis, Michel Foucault, and Richard Seaford than on the texts of ancient authors themselves (which are referenced in only six of the sixty footnotes in this chapter). Kallis argues that the Greeks mastered the art of self-limitation when their society became the first in world history to be oriented toward money, the accumulation of which is the only pleasure one can never tire of. Philosophers “projected the conflict between social limit and the unlimited power of money onto the universe”

(86), essentially creating a noble lie that the cosmos, “an entity they *saw* as real and extant” (87, emphasis mine), demands human moderation. The notion of hubris developed piecemeal as humans transgressed “previously undefined limits” through “excess—taking too much of something and removing it from its representative gods” (80). The creation of autonomous limits was shaped by the acceptance of a death which promised no eternal happiness. Having made this acknowledgment, “the Greeks were able to accept that it is we who make meaning in our lives. We do not have to search for it in the gods or the afterlife” (89). Self-limitation thus becomes a project of “psychoanalysis” on the individual level, and of democracy on the level of society. Kallis holds that the Greeks’ projection of limits onto nature was just that, a projection. It was a tool they used to curb unlimited human desires for wealth.

If at this point readers have reservations about Kallis’s understanding of the Greeks, they might also ask questions about his case for self-limitation. In his final chapter, “The Limits of Limits,” Kallis confronts some of these directly: Which claims to limits are reasonable and which are not? How can we discern between things we should limit and things we should not? If limits are supposed to be self-defined, can we accept limits imposed upon us by public authority? Kallis grants the difficulty of finding clear answers and prescribes prudence as a response. Still, he urgently insists on a comprehensive, top-down governmental response to environmental ills. He “want[s] government to tell me what we have agreed not to consume,” yet he admits that “when limits come to us from higher up, they appear heteronomous, imposed by the higher-level authority” (107).

His solution to this tension is to accept the contradictions he has encountered and promote a sober, moderate, “Mediterranean” understanding of personal and political conduct (115). The sort of everyday life he ends up praising is indeed admirable: “the believer who...shar[es] his or her time and resources in solidarity with others in the church or the mosque; the urban dwellers who are content with their work, family, or friends and do not seek power and ever-higher salaries...the pensioners who become environmental activists after retiring” (117). These ordinary people defy green technocracy; they represent “the environmentalism of people who do not want to...escape to Mars,” and thus they stand against Malthus’s contention that human wants cannot be limited (127). We can, in fact, choose to limit our own desires.

Still, Kallis’s insistence that there are no external, “heteronomous” limits to human behavior remains difficult to maintain throughout. Consider his suggestion for overcoming resource scarcity driven by political inequality: “Sharing the commons equitably could alleviate this scarcity, as people

would have access to the *minimum* they need to survive and as they would compare themselves less to others, having access to the same commons” (40, emphasis mine). Is there such a “minimum”? Does defining it not depend on the standard of living our society has chosen? Can a political culture rooted in “autonomy” even use this sort of language? According to the book’s reasoning, such standards are ultimately only matters of public debate, to which Kallis can contribute only his own part. We may want to make our environmental deliberation a conversation about the good life, but we cannot escape the need to at least explore common reference points for that conversation, such as what the minimum for human survival actually is, or the natures of the three ends of a worthwhile environmentalism—“freedom, justice, and sustainability”—that Kallis identifies (97).

Perhaps Malthus, of all people, can help us with this problem. In arguing against the perfectibility of human society, Malthus emphasizes the “essential” distinction “between an unlimited improvement and an improvement the limit of which cannot be ascertained. The former is an improvement not applicable to man under the present laws of his nature. The latter, undoubtedly, is applicable.”³ Even if no particular limit written into the fabric of nature is currently visible to us, maybe the fact of physical limitation itself is. This means that some self-limitations will make more sense given our physical reality than others will. The political project then becomes determining what self-limitations accord with our nature and that of the world around us.

And in the end, this conversation is very much like the one Kallis encourages. On a political level, *Limits* provides a refreshingly pluralistic vision of environmentalism, showing that focus on external limits to growth quickly becomes a survivalist monolith that pays no attention to what the actual relationship between human beings and their physical habitat should look like. The discussion of gravity highlights the fact that limits arise from *goals*: different people may have different environmental goals, different visions of the good life lived within nature. In debating which self-limitations are necessary for which reasons, citizens learn how to accept tradeoffs and make choices through deliberation, not simply at the command of scientific dicta. Kallis certainly has his own vision of the good life and what we must do to attain it, yet a reader can disagree with it while appreciating his broader point. As a call for ordinary citizens to engage with environmental questions and seriously ask what being an environmentalist means, *Limits* succeeds.

³ Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 86.

