

# *Enough*: Foundation for a Moral and Ecological Economics

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## **Introduction**

*How can we live in harmony with nature? How do we stop global warming, the associated climate change and the destruction of ecosystems?*

*How can we eliminate poverty, provide security and create sufficiency for all the people of the earth?*

*How do we restore an ethic of care for people and for the earth?*

*In short, how can we put human and planetary well-being at the centre of all our decision-making?*

The drive for economic growth at all costs, experienced in the boom years in Ireland and other affluent countries, brought a general increase in incomes and significant levels of wealth to a few. Jobs were plentiful and credit was easy to come by.

In these changed times, when businesses are failing and people are losing their jobs and in some cases their homes, it may seem crazy to criticise economic growth. But the kind of untrammelled growth that we experienced caused us to lose sight of limits, and at the same time destroyed ecosystems and created huge global and local social injustices. The culture surrounding growth also encouraged many of our worst human capacities: excess, indifference, cruelty, denial, cynicism, a narrow materialism and short-term thinking in an effort to compete with others.

Sufficiency, sustainability and security are key and pressing needs of people and living systems all over the world, as we move into the rest of this century. We also need maximum citizen participation, diversity, resilience and whole-system health. Untrammelled economic growth did not provide or foster those features, nor can it do so in the future.

Even if it were desirable to get back to that kind of growth, it is unlikely that we can, given that we are near the end of cheap oil, have imminent crises over water, and face the huge challenges of climate change. We need a new paradigm of progress and economic development.<sup>1</sup>

The philosophy of *enough* provides a sane basis for moving into the future. *Enough* stands between misery on the one hand and excess on the other. It has an immediate personal value in daily life. It is a way to be content, not in the sense of tolerating poor quality, but in the sense of knowing what is valuable and what is not, and relishing the good things we have already. It provides security in times of boom<sup>2</sup> and recession.

*Enough* is about creating many different channels for human growth and expansion. A culture of *enough* would judge human progress in diverse ways and not just in the quantitative, measurable sense of increasing GDP. Such a culture would always attempt to balance the considerable economic and scientific achievements we humans have made with an increase in our moral, ecological, spiritual and emotional development. Humane and ecologically sound cultures would be a mark of progress and human advancement.

## ***Enough* and Ecology**

The words ‘ecology’ and ‘economics’ have the same root: ‘eco’ meaning ‘home’ or ‘household’. *Enough* takes economics back into the scale of the household, makes it focus on the needs of the systems that sustain us, insists that economics should recognise how everything is connected in ‘the wider household of being’.<sup>3</sup> *Enough* treats markets, money, trade, science, technology, competition and profit – all the elements of modern growth economies – as good, creative activities in themselves, which can be harnessed for the good of people and the planet *if* they are kept within moral and ecological boundaries. It distinguishes vibrant economic activity, including ecologically sound growth, from unregulated economic growth.

Scientific insights into the natural world have made the marvels of healthy ecological systems available to us. These systems do not waste; they are economical in the original sense of the word; they elegantly and spontaneously<sup>4</sup> observe limits. They are, in other words, truly sustainable. We could take our cue from these organic systems and encourage human, social and economic systems modelled on them.

We can use insights from the study of nature as a way to examine the kinds of systems that support life. We know that healthy ecosystems are rich in diversity and that they can provide more for their ‘inhabitants’ – human, plant or animal – than impoverished systems, even if both kinds of system start out with the same nutrient resources. For example, an ecologically run garden has a closed nutrient cycle; nothing leaves it in the form of waste; it uses everything it produces to provide nourishment for the soil and the plants. We also know that healthy systems accommodate growth, but of a cyclical rather than an unlimited kind. Nature favours cycles because they come to an organic end after a suitable period of growth.<sup>5</sup> They do not go on growing because, in nature, that is a cancer.

### **Enough and Aesthetics**

To appreciate *enough*, we also need an aesthetic sense that recognises the elegance of sufficiency. *Enough* has a beauty that is completely appropriate for our time. What if the cutting edge came to mean, rather than the ever-expanding of boundaries, the art of walking that edge between less and more, sometimes balancing, sometimes slipping? It would be beautiful and challenging at the same time.<sup>6</sup> Wealth could consist in achieving balance and wholeness, including humour, fun, laughter and creativity.

It is difficult to embrace *enough* and its recognition of limits if we consider them to be about mediocrity or deprivation. The notion of limits has taken on negative meanings within our modern way of seeing the world. *Enough* can put us back in touch with the parts of ourselves that understand the beauty of scale and sufficiency, the parts that empathise with the rest of creation. The arts – the record in music, painting, writing or dancing of what we have found beautiful or meaningful<sup>7</sup> – work with a notion of limits also. The artist has to prevent the work from exceeding itself, from becoming unwieldy or going on for too long. Otherwise the finished product becomes meaningless.

### **Enough and Morality**

Cultural and personal appreciations of the beauty of *enough* are also the start of a moral practice. A conversation about morality – the principles and values that underpin our actions – is essential for a different kind of public culture, one that does not rest on the idea that we are fundamentally economic

beings. Morality, like ecology, examines how all things can flourish in relation to each other. Both are concerned with connection and the effects which different parts of any system have on one another.

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### *A moral quest asks us to consider things we would often prefer to ignore*

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A moral quest asks us to consider things we would often prefer to ignore. It asks us to reflect on the place that each one of us has in this world, the extent of the damage that humans have done in the world and the responsibility that each one of us has for creating a just world: what, in short, are our obligations to other people and to the earth itself? And it requires more than asking what is wrong: it involves going on to ask, ‘how can we behave in ways that are right?’. Morality and ethics require that we examine the consequences of our beliefs and actions in areas beyond ourselves and our immediate environment, and in the long term. *Enough* recasts choice as moral decisions that strive for the common good.

### **Enough and Spirituality**

Spirituality, like morality, involves full and constant attention to and awareness of what is happening, even if this is painful. Full attention is spiritual in a sense that has nothing to do with institutional religion. If we truly pay attention to the present, then we cannot ignore what is going on around us, the social and environmental realities of which we are part.

An aspect of spirituality is about gaining peace of mind, and to this end many contemporary interpretations of spirituality would have us simply acknowledge and accept what we see. But only to acknowledge the world’s wrongs is more likely to bring despair, when we realise the extent of the wrongs. The only way to find peace is to resist what is wrong<sup>8</sup> and attempt to do right. The public side of the spiritual path – attention to social and economic systems – cannot be ignored in favour of the personal. Spiritual searching today must be infused with a political flavour if it is to be relevant to the contemporary scene.

It is not sufficient to embrace spirituality, if it is only to escape one’s own pain. For example, a spiritual celebration of nature, uplifting and healing

as it is, is not complete if it ignores the ways that unregulated economic growth violates nature, or if the spirituality does not try to defend nature. In any case, ecology teaches us that one part of a system cannot be truly healthy if other parts are in trouble.

The full potential of *enough* cannot be seen from where many of us currently stand. Many of us suffer from excess, while others live in misery, not having sufficient for their needs. The potential and beauty of *enough* become clear only as we travel along its path and put it into practice. *Enough* is a way; we cannot know all its aspects without actually doing it.

There are difficult sides to any spiritual way, such as doubt, fear, failure, uncertainty and struggle. These are to be accepted for what we can learn from them; pushing them aside is another form of denial.

### **Public Policies based on the Concept of *Enough***

*Enough* has important philosophical and reflective aspects, but it is also at the heart of many concrete proposals and frameworks for making the changes we need, in order to live well in the future.<sup>9</sup> Such proposals include ‘Contraction and Convergence’ and ‘Cap and Share’,<sup>10</sup> both based on the idea of a fair distribution of carbon-emission quotas to all citizens of the globe.

*Enough* also underpins a growing worldwide food movement, based on intelligent local agricultural practices and the renewal of a food culture in places where it has died out. The basic premise of intelligent agriculture is that food production and food consumption should take place as close together as possible.<sup>11</sup>

Another framework concerns basic financial security for everybody, which can in turn contribute to general security and a global reappraisal of growth, while also encouraging local development. This has developed into the idea of a universal basic income, or a citizens’ income, which provides sufficient cash for every citizen to have the basics for a decent life.<sup>12</sup>

Under a formal citizens’ income scheme, each citizen would receive a regular and unconditional cash income from the state. Everybody, whether they did paid work or not, would receive this, and they could spend it as they pleased. This would replace social welfare benefits as we currently

know them, and, most importantly, it would also extend to people who are not currently in receipt of state benefits. Ideally, a citizens’ income would be sufficient for each person to live a simple but satisfying lifestyle without supplementary income from paid work.



*Waste reflecting the excess that contrasts with ‘enough’* © istock

This radical proposal has huge implications for social justice, in that it provides security for all in ways that means-tested social welfare cannot do. Security is a prerequisite for reducing economic demands to sustainable levels, and for creating a social and cultural climate where everybody is free to act on their moral and ecological concerns.

A citizens’ income means that individuals are no longer dependent on jobs for their basic financial security. If everyone has sufficient for basic needs, simply by virtue of being a citizen, then losing a job is not as much of a disaster as it might otherwise be. Citizens also have meaningful choices about the kinds of paid and unpaid work they do.

A citizens’ income also provides a way out of the ‘poverty trap’, which is a major problem with the current welfare system. It can benefit employers, because it replaces the minimum wage, which can make businesses difficult to sustain and which can also have the effect of forcing growth, no matter what the ecological and moral consequences.

One source of finance for a citizen’s income is income tax. But there are much more creative and sustainable possibilities for financing it, such as the sharing of dividends from earth resources. If airwave licences were being issued, governments

could sell them to television and radio companies, instead of giving them free of charge, as they do now. Currently, companies can make profits for their shareholders from something received for nothing, but which belongs to all of us.

Those who own land could pay land dues to the public finances, and all of us would receive a share of it. For those who own very little land, the share we receive would be much greater than the share we pay. Those who own no land would pay nothing, but would receive their dividend nonetheless.

The notion of getting income from such sources is linked to the idea that all citizens of the planet have a right to the global commons, or earth resources. In Alaska, citizens already benefit from earth resources: all residents receive a dividend from the state's oil resources. In Norway, much of the income from oil reserves goes into the state pension fund, ensuring that all citizens have a decent pension. Indeed, creating a decent state pension for all would be a way to phase in a citizens' income.

### **Government and Citizenship**

The function of government, in the philosophy of *enough*, is to regulate at the broad parameters, in order to create deep security, and to allow citizens unlimited creativity and diversity within those parameters. In an ideal world, governments introduce frameworks such as a citizens' income, individual carbon quotas, and intelligent agricultural policies aimed at encouraging mass participation in food production. With key structures in place, citizens would see an improvement in the quality of life. In turn, this would give a new culture of *enough* a chance to flourish; its potential could emerge, co-created by government and citizens. It is important, therefore, that activists push for such frameworks to be formally introduced.

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Without appropriate legislation, the ethical and ecologically sound choices that many citizens want to make are not available to us. 'Maximum individual choice' is the big mantra within growth economics: we are promised enormous numbers of choices, which are supposed to make us happy. We

often talk about equality as if it means having the right to shop on an equal footing with other people. But many of the choices available are meaningless and cause unwanted and unnecessary complexity in our lives; they are not actually available to all and they often come at a price of ecological destruction and social injustice. The structures that surround us lock us in to such undesirable options. As a simple example, lack of good public transport locks us in to car-driving, which in turn makes life difficult for cyclists, pedestrians and those who are committed to using public transport.<sup>13</sup>

### **Citizen-leadership for *Enough***

In a time when the state is not providing structures and policies that foster virtuous action, even while we are constrained by harmful legislation and lack of appropriate legislation and structures, citizens stand in the gap between what is and what might be. All citizens have the capacity to be leaders while we stand in that gap. The great middle ground is important in bringing about cultural change. Ordinary people, acting together in initiatives for local food, transport and energy, can educate elected leaders and lawmakers. This is already happening with food co-operatives and with the Transition Towns movement.<sup>14</sup>

As individuals, we need to develop the resources and capacities for *enough* that exist within all of us. An appreciation of *enough* can help us to challenge the dominant media and government obsession with getting back to 'business as usual'. Imagination is crucial in this project. We cannot all be official, designated leaders, but if leadership is about taking risks and bringing other people along in a new vision, then we can all do it. No matter what our age, occupation or role, we can regularly ask questions about how we should live, what is good, how we can achieve well-being for everybody, how we can respect the earth and how we can take the long-term view and try to see the whole picture. We can engage in conversation with others about these issues. A society that does not cultivate the art of asking questions cannot count on finding answers to its most pressing issues.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

*Enough* has a good history; it is rooted in past generations and has been valued and practised by several great wisdom traditions, including religions, especially those traditions that have an ecological outlook, and which view humans as part of the great natural systems. Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism,

Hinduism, Christianity, have, for thousands of years, promoted the virtues of moderation. Although *enough* does not rely on religious doctrine, it is not rigidly secular either; its spiritual and ecological dimensions take it beyond any view of life and the world that values only the strictly rational, observable and material.

The problems we face are all connected with each other. But just as important, the solutions are also interconnected. A sense of *enough* creates the conditions that will allow a critique of growth. It can also nourish a culture of adapted human behaviour, which will give at least some of the earth's ecosystems a chance to renew themselves and at the same time allow social justice to emerge.

There is no perfect worldview; anything taken to an extreme will show its shadow side or become dogma. But a reflexive attitude can prevent the way of *enough* becoming rigid. This means sticking with the questions and not flinching from the challenges inherent in them. *Enough* is a key concept for the future. It is living, adaptive and dynamic; it encourages creativity and diversity for groups and individuals around the world. We can forge connections and discover common ground, centred on *enough*.

## Notes

1. Gerry O'Hanlon SJ, 'A New Economic Paradigm?', *Working Notes*, No. 63, March 2010, pp. 3–10.
2. At the height of the boom in Ireland, many people were already living according to a philosophy of *enough*, seeing it as a route to deep security. For case studies, see Anne B. Ryan, *Balancing Your Life: A Practical Guide to Work, Time, Money and Happiness*, Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002.
3. Ursula K. Le Guin quoted in Erika Milo, 'Life in the Wider Household of Being: An Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin', *North by Northwest.org Online Magazine*, November 2003 ([www.northbynorthwest.org](http://www.northbynorthwest.org)).
4. Bill McKibben, *Enough: Genetic Engineering and Human Nature*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 214.
5. Barbara Brandt, *Whole Life Economics: Revaluing Daily Life*, Philadelphia, PA and Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1995.
6. Bill McKibben, *op. cit.*, p. 217.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
8. Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Spirituality of Resistance: Finding a Peaceful Heart and Protecting the Earth*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.
9. For greater detail on all of the proposals mentioned here, see Anne B. Ryan, *Enough is Plenty: Public and Private Policies for the 21st Century*, Hants: O-Books, 2009. See also website ([www.enoughisplenty.net](http://www.enoughisplenty.net)).
10. Aubrey Meyer, *Contraction and Convergence: The Global Solution to Climate Change* (Schumacher Briefing No. 5), Totnes, Devon: Green Books, 2005. See also website: [www.capandshare.org](http://www.capandshare.org)
11. Colin Tudge, *So Shall We Reap: What's Gone Wrong with the World's Food – And How to Fix It*, London: Penguin, 2004; Colin Tudge, *Feeding People is Easy*, Paris, Tuscany: Paris Publishing, 2007.
12. Clive Lord, *A Citizens' Income: A Foundation for a Sustainable World*, Charlbury: Jon Carpenter, 2003. See also website: [www.citizensincome.org](http://www.citizensincome.org)
13. Roger Levett with Ian Christie, Michael Jacobs and Riki Therivel, *A Better Choice of Choice: Quality of Life, Consumption and Economic Growth*, London: Fabian Society, 2003.
14. See the websites of the Dublin Food Co-op ([www.dfc.ie](http://www.dfc.ie)) and of Transition Towns ([www.transitionculture.org](http://www.transitionculture.org)).
15. cf Cornelius Castoriadis, cited in Henry A. Giroux, *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, p. 81.

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