

Why We Need To Embrace A Unifying Systems View of Life

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Have you ever stopped to question the true essence of growth? In a world driven by relentless economic expansion, it's time we reframe our understanding of growth from a purely quantitative perspective to one that embraces quality and thriving.

In a practical sense, we seem to always be focused on profit maximization when making decisions in our modern society. This cultural focus drives profit-based decisions at the expense of everything

else – life, the commons, people, our health etc.

A big part of the conversation we are changing here at CE is to embrace a paradigm shift in the way we think about economies and society.

Moving From Endless Expansion to Thrivability

What if the very foundation of our economic system is flawed? Recall that almost every decision we make in our economy today is based on profit maximization. We believe we must compete to the scale and level of destruction we do because that is what is “natural” to humans. Is this really true?

All other natural creatures can maintain balance, why not humans?

I would suggest that it's when we lose sight of our nature and become too lost in the mind is when we begin to destroy.

Growth is indeed a hallmark of life, but in nature, it is balanced and cyclical.

Organisms and ecosystems don't grow indefinitely; they expand, mature, decline, and renew. This natural balance offers a

profound lesson for our economic models.

We need to consider economies in this same way, and begin imagining what this could look like.

Enhancing Life and Complexity

What does “growth that enhances life” look like? In living organisms, ecosystems, and societies, qualitative growth manifests as increased complexity, sophistication, and maturity. Unlike the unsustainable model of infinite quantitative growth on a finite planet, qualitative growth can be sustained.

It *thrives* on a dynamic balance between growth, decline, and recycling, and it encompasses inner growth through learning and maturation.

This focus on qualitative growth aligns perfectly with the systems view of life, which is fundamentally a science of qualities. Ecological sustainability hinges on principles like interdependence and the cyclical nature of ecological processes, expressed through patterns of relationships rather than mere quantities.

In this new systemic conception of life, qualities such as stress or health arise from processes and relationships among parts, not from the sum of individual components. This perspective demands that we map qualities rather than merely measure quantities.

Interestingly enough, our world is obsessed with sustainability at the moment. That is great, but this is also part of the limited thinking we have become accustomed to. Given what we have been exposed to, or not, we tend to use that exposure to imagine what's possible.

For example, many people believe we must cut our energy usage back in order to be sustainable. This is because we have not come to understand the technology that exists that could allow our energy usage to be unlimited without harming the environment. We believe our governments and tech companies are releasing 'the best stuff' when in reality they are shelving life changing technology to protect their investments and maintain power.

The Intersection of Science and Subjective Experience

How do we reconcile objective qualities with subjective experiences? The qualities of complex systems include both objective properties and subjective elements, especially when human experiences are involved.

For example, the quality of health involves both objective factors and subjective well-being. Similarly, the quality of human relationships is deeply rooted in mutual subjective experiences. Understanding these qualities scientifically is known as the “hard problem” of consciousness studies, highlighting the intricate interplay between objective and subjective realms. We have covered this subject at length here on CE, check out our search archives.

To truly assess the health of an economy, we need qualitative indicators that go beyond monetary metrics. What is the actual quality of life of the humans within the economy? What about nature? How about spiritual, mental and physical health? Well being should be measured as a whole, not based on foolish ideas like GDP.

A Multidimensional Perspective

Have you ever considered how growth differs across various stages of life? In both organisms and ecosystems, growth follows a natural progression from rapid physical expansion to slower growth, maturation, and eventually decline. This biological perspective of growth as a dynamic and multifaceted process offers valuable insights for economic development.

The current narrow economic sense of “development,” focused on unlimited quantitative growth, is unsustainable. It pushes against planetary boundaries.

However, if we broaden our understanding to include social, ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, development becomes a multidimensional and systemic process that can indeed be sustainable.

Scholars and activists today advocate for this broader view, in fact, this is the essence of our work since we began in 2009. I suspect this perspective will grow immensely in the coming years.

A Holistic Vision of Growth – Thrivability

As we navigate the complexities of our world, it's imperative that we shift from a mindset of quantitative growth to one of qualitative growth. By embracing this paradigm, we can create an economic system that enhances life, respects natural cycles, and fosters holistic development.

As a result of working in accordance with all of these systems, thriving emerges naturally because we aren't pulling anything, including ourselves, out of balance. Sure, it will be challenging still, but this approach is much wiser than our current ways.

How can each of us contribute to this transformative vision, integrating these principles into our daily lives and collective actions?

By reevaluating our concept of growth and aligning it with the natural world's wisdom, we can pave the way for a more balanced, sustainable, and fulfilling existence. It's time to take action, reflect on new ways of thinking, and embrace the profound shift in consciousness that qualitative growth represents.

