



## Book Review

### Heteronomous limits vs. Self-limitation to address environmental problems. A Book Review of “Limits: Why Malthus was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care” by Giorgos Kallis (2019).

In his book titled “Limits: why Malthus was wrong and why environmentalists should care”, Kallis (2019) proposes a re-reading of Thomas Robert Malthus’ theory and argues that the current economic paradigm, based on perpetual economic growth, was firstly theorized by the early economist. Scarcity of resources and goods would be constantly caused, according to Malthus, by the human population growing significantly faster (geometrically) than the availability and manufacturing of resources (growing arithmetically). Malthus, Kallis summarizes, did not think that limiting childbirths would be practicable to solve a potentially recurring problem of resource scarcity, as this would affect the level of happiness of the population (adopting here a religious standpoint), while reducing poverty through charity and redistribution would produce negative social outcomes, such as laziness. Thus, according to Malthus, the only viable solution would be to keep the poor poor and use poverty to justify and propel economic growth.

It is in this reasoning that, according to Kallis, resides one of the most problematic tenants of our current economic model, particularly due to its repercussions in terms of environmental health and sustainability. Furthermore, Kallis suggests, a similar constructed idea of scarcity has been incorporated in other policy domains, such as in the way we frame environmentalism itself. Think for instance at the temperature threshold we generally attempt to adopt to tackle climate change, which is based on an idea of scarcity or limited capacity of the system to absorb changes.

While convincingly laying down his argument, connecting economic growth to the idea of scarcity, Kallis, an Ecological Economist, and a proponent of the Degrowth movement, also engages in a broader discussion on what we intend for social and biophysical limits, what is the difference between self-imposed limits and heteronomous limits, and which processes should we adopt to determine self-imposed limits and ensure social and environmental well-being. To investigate these concepts in a more concrete way, the author also analyses the ancient Greece culture, as a potentially unique example of a society that attempted to overcome its focus on materiality and money through self-limitation.

Overall, the book touches upon some of the most crucial questions we encounter when tackling environmental problems, not least by reconsidering some of the foundational premises on which our current socio-economic model is based. “Limits” is adapted to the broad audience who wants to engage with relevant philosophical questions on this topic. The arguments proposed by Kallis are certainly innovative in many aspects, but they also present some weaknesses and drawbacks. In this book review, I examine one main theme discussed in the book, that related to Kallis’ perspective on why and how we should define limits in

the Anthropocene. Indeed, while some other book reviewers have wondered why degrowth, a theme close to the author, is little mentioned in the book (Brockington, 2020; Chaudhuri, 2022), I’d argue that the book is not about degrowth but about limits, similarly to Sconfienza (2020) and, more precisely, a compelling call for freedom through limits.

In “Limits”, Kallis defines self-imposed, socio-economic or biophysical limits as those determined in a participatory, democratic, and bottom-up way. Further he suggests that it is only when we accept the world as abundant, meaning when we stop worrying about staying within heteronomous limits (i.e., those “attributed to an external authority that cannot be questioned” (Kallis, 2019, p. 43)), that we can truly engage in a path of self-limitation, adapted to address our current environmental challenges.

However, we can wonder about the practicality of this process, especially at broad system scales. Who should be involved? And, as Kallis himself notes, how to handle situations in which it is hard to reach an agreement amongst all the actors involved? Moreover, how does this process of self-limitation differ from the way we already take decisions and set limits on multiple matters? Aren’t some of the heteronomous limits that Kallis describes the result of participatory processes as well, although involving a specific fraction of the population, that of “experts”? The author himself suggests that “hard limits, [...] are the outcomes of social processes” (Kallis, 2019, p. 47) or, regarding climate change, that “Two degree is not a limit that resides in nature; it is self-imposed” (Kallis, 2019, p. 48), despite clearly labelling it elsewhere as a heteronomous (or hard) type of limit. Indeed, the boundaries between hard, or heteronomous limits, and self-imposed limits get blurred in the description presented in the book. Unless heteronomous limits need to be intended as those set by experts, or other authoritative actors, at high scales, and self-limitation is that practiced by members of lay public at small scales, the difference between the two categories is difficult to discern. Variations in the scale, the process and the actors involved seem to determine the perception we have or should have about limits, while a clearcut separation between the two categories appears as less workable.

Kallis also proposes, somehow counterintuitively, that self-limitation would set us free. I concur here with the author, as infinite possibilities can indeed be confounding and frightening and might not put us on a comfortable, constructive, and productive path. Despite this, can we be sure that participatory, self-imposed societal or biophysical limits would not constrain us in the same way as heteronomous limits do? For instance, due to the shortcomings and inadequacies of the participatory process itself? Our limited capacity to adequately understand the complexity of the social-ecological-technological system, might also cause us to identify and abide to an unsuitable or counterproductive limit, even if temporally. Further elaboration about the shortcomings involved in a participatory or bottom up process of self-limitation would be required.

A discussion regarding the benefits of improving the moral makeup

of individuals, entailing a change of perspective or of consciousness towards self-limitation, is important to consider in our attempt to tackle current environmental problems. This could take the form of each individual not taking or consuming more than what one needs. But a discussion on self-limitation at the individual level is only marginally addressed in the book.

An additional critique advanced by some reviewers relates to the often constructivist nature of Kallis' arguments. Indeed, biophysical limits are often presented in the book as mere social constructs (Gomez-Baggethun, 2021). For instance, it is stated that "It is when we realize that in a sense there are no external limits that we should limit ourselves" (Kallis, 2019, p. 56); or that an environmental limit "resides in the subject and the intention" rather than in nature (Kallis, 2019, p. 47). Here, I concur with Gomez-Baggethun (2021) regarding the problematic consequences that can arise when we doubt the objective existence of a biophysical limits. Crossing biophysical limits often unquestionably results in a diminished health of the biophysical system (i.e., its ability to function and fulfil its purpose). Dismissing the existence of biophysical limits can thus weaken our capacity to assess and address the environmental impacts of our actions (Hornborg, 2021), not least by diminishing our effectiveness in raising public awareness of environmental issues.

Nonetheless, Kallis makes an important consideration here, that, in some circumstances, it can be scientifically unjustified, arbitrary, or even dangerous to identify and impose biophysical limits. This is mostly due to the complexity of the social-ecological-technological system, its non-linear dynamics and emergent properties (Levin et al., 2013; McPhearson et al., 2022; Norgaard, 2010), which make it difficult to adequately estimate thresholds. As a matter of fact, some biophysical limits, assessed and then translated into policy objectives, camouflaged under a purported scientific objectivity, could be used to justify abuses of power, as Kallis also notes. Due to the possibility of these dynamics to emerge, some have indeed come to speak about the peril of Ecofascism (Zimmerman, 2004; Zimmerman, 1995).

Finally, some other reviewers have questioned the depiction of the Greek culture in Kallis' book as a unique example of society that embraced self-limitation in the accumulation of money and resources (Brockington, 2020; Sconfienza, 2020). Indeed, this description does not appear as entirely persuasive. For instance, Brockington (2020) notices that there are other societies and cultures for which the idea of limiting the accumulation of material resources is central, such as for some populations in Colombia, pastoralists in Tanzania and the Jewish society.

In the case of Judaism, limitations to the accumulation of money and wealth are numerous. There are times in the week (the Shabat, the seventh day of the week) and in the year (the numerous festivities) when work is not permitted (Tamari, 1998). Additionally, for a week in the case of mourning of a close relative or for a bridegroom, the person is also not allowed to work (Tamari, 1998). During the sabbatical year (the final year at the end of a seven-year cycle) and the jubilee year (the fiftieth year), economic activity in the agricultural sector is restricted: the land becomes ownerless for a year, in the case of the sabbatical; and, in the case of the jubilee, the land is additionally returned to its original owner (based on the distribution of the land determined in the times of Moses). Another important activity in Judaism is that of giving charity, which further limits the accumulation of money. It is ruled that at least 10% of the income should be given to the benefit of others.

Even though there is no vow of poverty in Judaism, and riches are considered a blessing, there is also an obligation to study Torah (the five books of Moses) and the ensemble of Jewish scriptures. Devoting excessive time to commercial activity, neglecting the study, is considered a religious shortcoming. Economic activity is not seen as an end in itself but a function to spiritual growth (Tamari, 1998). As such, economic activity is heavily regulated in Judaism, beside the mentioned times in which it is not permitted to work. There are thus various opportunities to engage in self-limitation in the accumulation of money

and goods for the observant Jew.

The notion of freedom through limits advanced in the book is also a basic tenant of Judaism. According to the Torah, the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt (in Hebrew Mitzrayim, which also means limitations) in the year 1429 BCE. Egypt at that time was a society worshipping its source of material prosperity, Hapy, the god of the Nile flood (Hart, 2005). In the book of Exodus, it is narrated that G-d freed the Hebrews from slavery, out of Egypt, to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai. The Torah, means "instruction" in Hebrew and contains 613 Mitzvots or commandments. The liberation from Egypt and its limitations appears in antithesis to having as a primary objective to receive commandments. However, it is understood in Judaism that it is only through the performing of the Mitzvots, or divinely received commandments, that one can experience true and lasting freedom. It is indeed assumed that the Mitzvots have their source in the infinite wisdom of G-d, are unchanging, eternal and thus able to free the person from changing, potentially constraining and counterproductive social customs, dictates of fashion, predominant opinions, and the consent of society (Abergel and Hai, 2018). The observance of the Mitzvots is also directed towards infinite possibilities for spiritual growth and to move the person and the society away from a focus on limited materiality. Based on these considerations, the claim made in the book that the Greek culture is the only example of a society practicing restraint and self-limitation should also be reconsidered.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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