

ARTICLES

Jainism and Contemporary Degrowth Movements

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Keywords: Jainism, degrowth, dualism, economics

<https://doi.org/10.12794/journals.suijs.v1i1.314>

Samyak: An Undergraduate Journal of Jain Studies

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2025

In his 2022 book *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, Jason Hickel critiques current economic models that prioritize growth above all else. He attributes this growth mindset in part to the dualistic ontologies he associates with the rise of European modernism. In place of this dualistic framework, he calls for an animistic and holistic outlook that overcomes the divide between humans and nature. While supporting Hickel's overall project, this essay questions whether dualism is the culprit behind the unrestrained growth of the economy. After all, many animist traditions are compatible with, or even premised on, a dualism between spirit and matter. A philosophy such as Jainism, for example, asserts a strict dualism between sentient souls and inert matter, while simultaneously recognizing that souls can inhabit any number of material vessels, including human bodies, animal bodies, plant bodies, and even mineral bodies. Moreover, Jainism is overtly critical of unrestrained economic growth, thanks to its teachings on nonviolence and non-possessiveness. Hence, dualism is not fundamentally opposed to economic degrowth models.

What is the job of the philosopher? This is a question every philosopher has been asked and one that has been answered in a multitude of ways. I would suggest that the job of the philosopher is to diagnose. Much like a general doctor, the philosopher's job is to examine the issues we face to identify and treat them. Perhaps it is not the philosopher who offers the solution; but, like the first stop a sick person may take, a philosopher might look the issue over and send it on its way to the field most adapted to treat it. This could be sociology, science, psychology, or any other field. Then, to be a good philosopher, one must have a large pool of knowledge to pull from. Like a general doctor, the more one knows of neighboring medical fields, the more confident one's diagnoses are. But where does a philosopher go to acquire a vast net of knowledge? This underscores the importance of studying diverse thinkers and traditions and understanding these ideas to better diagnose our world.

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This essay focuses on Jainism, a religion originating in India that provides us with possible solutions to the economic issues we face today. In this paper, I will examine the prevailing economic theories that prioritize growth, attempt to understand the causes behind this growth mindset, and, through the lens of Jainism, understand what we can do to diagnose the problems associated with growth economies. Many economic “degrowth” movements gaining popularity today are premised on a critique of the dualistic outlook associated with European modernism. Jainism, however, asserts a strict dualism between sentient souls and inert matter while simultaneously promoting ideas squarely in line with degrowth values, such as non-possessiveness and non-harm. By expanding our pool of knowledge to engage with Jainism, we can question the diagnosis that identifies dualism as the root of various economic and ecological problems.

“Growthism” and the Current Economic Order

Declaring something as a problem that all of humanity faces is a tricky proposition. Often, issues do not exist solely to hinder humankind; they instead originate from complex histories. Many of the causes of the issues we face today were once hailed as solutions and innovations, and only with time have we seen what the choices of our past indicate for our future. We must also be careful about whom we include in the scope of our concern. An anthropocentric view is often the only lens we choose to use, but widening that scope to include not only other living beings but also the environment they live in is integral when diagnosing our collective problems; an ecocentric lens must be used. If we were to elevate only humans as worthy of concern, we risk harming ourselves further by jeopardizing the harmony of our shared ecologies.

If we are to diagnose like a doctor might, we must look at what could be tipping our ecologies out of homeostasis. The rising cost to continue our consumption as a species has forced us to exploit everything we can for the sake of growth. But what does growth mean? Growthism or productivism is the belief that continuous economic growth is essential for human wellbeing and the solution to societal problems.¹ At first glance, this idea may seem to be good, especially to people raised in a culture that values the importance of growth. Growth seemingly signifies progress, prosperity, and expanded possibilities.

However, closer inspection reveals that the goal of endless growth is the main contributor to many of our current ecological, economic, and social issues. The economic anthropologist Jason Hickel explains that current economic theory holds that for a healthy economy, GDP must rise by three percent

¹ Steve Horn, “Power Shift Away from Green Illusions.”

yearly, and that number compounds.² That means we must continuously innovate to meet that number or risk economic recession and collapse. In his 2022 book *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, Hickel critiques such an economic models that prioritize growth above all else.

Hickel cites the philosophies of Renè Descartes (1596–1650) and Francis Bacon (1561–1626) in his diagnosis of this growth mindset. In particular, Hickel criticizes Bacon’s scientific method and Descartes’ dualism of mind and matter:

In Bacon’s writing. . . [n]ot only is nature something to be controlled and manipulated, it is also transformed from a living organism into inert matter. Nature may appear to be alive and moving, but its motion should be understood as that of a machine. . . . it was in the hands of another man, only a few years later, that this vision of nature-as-machine was formulated into a coherent philosophy: the French thinker René Descartes.³

Hickel further explains:

[Descartes] argued that there was a fundamental dichotomy between mind and matter. Humans are unique among all creatures in having minds (or souls), he claimed—the mark of their special connection to God. By contrast, the rest of creation is nothing but unthinking material. Plants and animals have no spirit or agency, intention or motivation; they are mere automatons, operating according to predictable mechanical laws, ticking away like a clock.⁴

Elevating the human above all leads to a hierarchical and anthropocentric view. If we are the only thinking things, and everything else is as lifeless as a rock, then why extend any moral concern to non-humans? This separation of the human from the rest of the world supports a philosophy of consumerism and growthism. Hickel writes: “Once nature was an object, you could do more or less anything you wanted to it. Whatever ethical constraints remained against possession and extraction had been removed, much to the delight of capital. Land became property. Living beings became things. Ecosystems became resources.”⁵ While the physical damage Hickel cites is clear, less clear is the violence done to our spiritual wellbeing.

² Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, 26.

³ Hickel, *Less is More*, 69.

⁴ Hickel, *Less is More*, 69.

⁵ Hickel, *Less is More*, 70.

Studies show the increasing rates of depression and suicide everywhere in the most developed countries, often with the highest GDPs.⁶ We are driven apart by the distances created by cars and roads, forced into a growth mindset not of our choice, and given a purpose at birth that many of us would not elect for ourselves. To produce and consume often gives us an illusion of satisfaction, but often, these physical gains leave us feeling empty. Hickel points to this spiritual malaise and advocates for an animistic worldview, one in which we recognize our connectedness with the world. However, this overlooks the important sense in which an animistic worldview may be thoroughly dualistic. Hickel claims that “Dualist philosophy was leveraged to cheapen life for the sake of growth; and it is responsible at a deep level for our ecological crisis.”⁷ But this broad indictment of dualism perhaps casts too wide of a net.

Animism, Dualism, and Jainism

Of animism, Hickel writes:

My colleagues in anthropology have long pointed out that for most of human history, people operated with a very different ontology—a theory of being that we refer to, broadly, as animist. For the most part, people saw no fundamental divide between humans and the rest of the living world. Quite the opposite: they recognised a deep interdependence with rivers, forests, animals and plants, even with the planet itself, which they saw as sentient beings, just like people, and animated by the very same spirit. In some cases, they even regarded them as kin.⁸

Hickel’s understanding of animism seems to imply holism (the deep interdependence between humans and nature) and perhaps monism (in that all beings share the same spirit).

However, Jainism’s teachings reflect elements of both animism and dualism. Namely, Jainism asserts a strict divide between matter and spirit and recognizes that souls are distinct individuals. They can inhabit many different material bodies, including animal bodies, plant bodies, and even mineral bodies. On the one hand, this mirrors the dualism proposed by Descartes regarding mind and matter. On the other hand, unlike Descartes, Jainism does not believe that souls are unique to humans alone. Things like elements—water, fire, earth, air—house jivas or souls that can be harmed. Jain cosmology significantly expands the category of the living in a manner

⁶ Hickel, *Less Is More*, 177.

⁷ Hickel, *Less Is More*, 32.

⁸ Hickel, *Less Is More*, 32.

that can be compared to an ecocentric view. The Jains offer a metaphysical commitment to the omnipresence of individual souls. The world, for Jains, is a vast field of vulnerable, entangled life, each soul on its own path, a path we must protect.

However, Jainism perhaps differs from an ecocentric view in that the goal of the spiritual path is precisely the disentanglement of the soul from its material shell. The Jains believe that karma is a material particle that attaches to the soul, and the Jains practice austerities in order to remove the karma attached to their souls, leave the cycle of rebirth, and eventually be liberated from material existence altogether. However, we need not aim for such spiritual liberation to use the Jain view to properly diagnose the economic and ecological issues we face. Jain dualism offers us an idea not of a monistic collapse into one substance, but of the ethical entanglement of distinct beings, a spiritual ecology that honors difference without hierarchy. Unlike Cartesian dualism, which often results in a hierarchical and exploitative view of the world, Jain dualism is relational and ethical. It distinguishes soul from matter to emphasize our entanglement and responsibility within a world composed of both. In this model, the goal is not to dominate material existence, but to live harmoniously within it, minimizing harm and detaching from possessions.

Applying this Jain dualism to our current world may seem difficult, but key Jain tenets have broad appeal. These are *anekāntavāda*, also known as “many-sidedness” or the doctrine of multiple perspectives; *ahiṃsā* or “nonviolence”; and most importantly for our use, *aparigraha* or “non-possessiveness.” Atul Shah, in his article “Aparigraha: Understanding the Nature and Limits of Finance,” explores the dangers of what our current consumptive economic model does to our collective health and discusses how to apply the concept of *aparigraha*. As Shah writes, “The Jain ethic of *Aparigraha* is radically different from profit or wealth maximisation. *Aparigraha* means ‘not engaging in possessiveness.’”⁹ He then goes on to state that much human suffering is rooted in the possessiveness of objects, and happiness cannot be achieved through the accumulation of objects.

Jainism and Degrowth

Jain practices regarding non-possessiveness line up remarkably well alongside economic theories that might be loosely affiliated with the “degrowth” model that Hickel explores in *Less Is More*. For example, one thinker that Hickel cites is the social theorist Murray Bookchin. Bookchin’s idea of social ecology is the belief that almost all issues pertaining to the environment are social problems first. Many of the social issues that arise from the hierarchical dualist form of thinking not only allow for the destruction of our world, but

⁹ Shah, “Aparigraha,” 40.

also the destruction of each other. In addressing these social issues, we also address the causes that led to harm. When Bookchin's ideas are viewed from a Jain perspective, many of his ideas correlate with the practices of Jainism. By focusing first on the social dimensions of issues causing harm, which include our consumption habits, we then address the issues directly harming our environment.

Another relevant example to the degrowth discussion is the idea of "library socialism," which is a relatively new concept originating from the utopian thinker Shawn Vulliez. In this, the economy would be based on a library system, one in which the idea of ownership would be replaced by the idea of borrowing everything. There could be libraries for tools, clothes, furniture, and so forth, where the idea would be to use without owning and without destroying. The term usufruct refers to the commitment not to break or misuse the object one has borrowed. A view such as this changes our relation with objects from materials to be used and exploited to materials we must share. If items were produced to be shared, then the idea of planned obsolescence would lose any appeal, waste would be reduced, and needless consumption would slow. Applying a spiritual view like aparigraha, which supports this move to renounce personal possessions, could provide a philosophical context for such a "library socialism" approach to degrowth.

In the examples above, Jainism's dualism is not an obstacle to its views on nonviolence and non-possessiveness. Indeed, arguably, the strict dualism between soul and matter is the philosophical foundation for the claim that souls cannot find ultimate happiness or purpose through material possessions. Moreover, many animistic traditions may be compatible with a similar divide between spirits and their material vessels. Perhaps not dualism but rather excessive possessiveness is the more fundamental problem in diagnosing the dangers of the growth economy.

Published: September 01, 2025 CDT.



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