

# Economic questions: the John Ruskin question

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*This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).*

*After the first two posts in this series, the topics have been chosen by me, and this is one of those. This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.*

*Why have I included [John Ruskin](#) in this series? As Wikipedia notes:*

*John Ruskin was an English [polymath](#) – a writer, lecturer, art historian, art critic, draughtsman and philanthropist of the Victorian era. He wrote on subjects as varied as art, architecture, political economy, education, museology, geology, botany, ornithology, literature, history, and myth.*

*I agree with that, having come across his work in a number of those fields. But I have chosen to include him here because he coined the term 'illth'. He did so in an essay of 1860 ([Unto This Last](#), Essay IV). His claim was that wealth is not simply the ownership of valuable things. Wealth, he suggested, only exists when value is held by those capable of using it well. Possession without purpose, capacity, or social contribution is not, he argued, wealth at all.*

*That argument has two inseparable components. They are that not only has the intrinsic value of property to be considered, but also the moral and practical capacity of the owner to put that value to use has to be considered before determining the existence of wealth. Where that second element is missing, Ruskin argued that riches become economically inert or actively harmful. This thinking likens hoarded assets to stagnant pools, dams blocking productive flow, or obstacles that create disruption rather than benefit. In some cases, they generate what Ruskin called "illth". This is not wealth, but its opposite in the form of social damage, delay, and decay.*

Crucially, this view does, in that case, reject the idea that the private accumulation of what can be measured in financial terms as wealth is automatically good for society. That wealth, if unused, misused, or held solely for preservation, can drain vitality from an economy rather than support it. The mere fact of ownership, Ruskin argued, does nothing for the common good unless it enables productive, purposeful action.

The implication is directly relevant today. If wealth does not circulate, or result in active investment, or does not sustain people, places, and capabilities, then it is not a national asset. It is, at best, dead weight. At worst, it can be a source of economic and social harm. This reframes the entire debate about inequality, hoarding, and the responsibilities that come with ownership. That is why Ruskin is considered here.

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[John Ruskin](#) (1819 - 1900) wrote at the height of Britain's Victorian industrial transformation. He lived through the period when railways tore through landscapes, factories reshaped cities, transforming agriculture at the same time, and when industrial capitalism first revealed both its immense productive power and its brutal human and environmental costs. This was an age that celebrated progress in iron, coal, steam and finance and measured success almost exclusively in output, trade and wealth accumulation.

Ruskin was trained as an art critic and historian, but he never confined himself to a single discipline. He moved easily between aesthetics, ethics, political economy and social reform because he believed these could not be separated. What disturbed him was not industrialisation itself, but the way Victorian society had begun to worship production while becoming blind to destruction. The new economy generated unprecedented riches, and yet it was clear that it also produced polluted rivers, disfigured landscapes, slum housing, exhausted workers, child labour, and widespread ill health. These harms were not accidents. They were integral to how the new wealth of the era in which he lived was being created.

It was in this context that Ruskin coined the deliberately jarring term [illth](#). He did so because the language of economics had no word for what he was seeing. Everything that produced money was being counted as wealth, regardless of its consequences. Ruskin recognised that this linguistic and philosophical failure was not neutral. If an economy cannot name harm, it will reward it. Illth was his attempt to restore moral and material clarity and to insist that wealth gained through damage is not wealth at all, but its opposite.

Illth was not a rhetorical flourish. It was, at its core, an accounting intervention. Ruskin was arguing that an economy can expand numerically while impoverishing society in reality and that unless economics learns to distinguish between life-enhancing and life-destroying activity, it will systematically mislead both policymakers and citizens.

Hence the John Ruskin Question: ***If economic activity can generate “illth” — wealth that destroys life — why does modern economics still treat all growth as progress and all income as gain?***

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### ***Illth as the mirror image of wealth***

Ruskin defined wealth as that which sustains and enriches life. He argued that anything that undermines health, dignity, community or nature could not be wealth, no matter how profitable it appeared. Illth was therefore not the absence of wealth but its negation: money gained at the expense of life itself.

This distinction undermines a central assumption of modern economics, which is that value is always revealed by price. Ruskin insisted that price can disguise harm. Pollution, dangerous labour, shoddy housing, environmental destruction and social breakdown can all be profitable. That profitability does not redeem them. It condemns them.

Illth is what results when markets reward harm faster than society can recognise it.

### ***Why economics cannot see illth***

Modern economics struggles with illth because its core metrics cannot register it. GDP rises when forests are felled, when illnesses are managed rather than cured or even prevented, when disasters require reconstruction, and when insecurity is monetised. The accounting systems of both the private and state sectors record activity, but not consequence, and most definitely not value.

Ruskin saw this clearly. An economy obsessed with throughput will count damage as success as long as money changes hands. Illth flourishes precisely because it looks like growth. This is not a technical oversight. It is a moral failure embedded in measurement.

### ***Labour degraded, wealth corrupted***

Ruskin, like many concerned people of his period (of whom Dickens and Trollope are other examples), placed labour at the heart of his critique. He argued that work that degrades the worker, whether through physical, mental, or moral exploitation, produces illth, even if it produces profit. A system that relies on exhaustion, monotony, precarity or danger is not productive. It is extractive.

This insight prefigures later critiques (such as those of [David Graeber](#) and [Guy Standing](#)) ***of alienation, precarity and burnout. Ruskin understood that when labour is treated purely as a cost to be minimised, the economy consumes***

***human beings as fuel. The result is not prosperity but decay.***

***Illth accumulates in broken bodies, hollowed skills and diminished lives.***

### ***Environmental destruction as illth creation***

Ruskin was an early environmental thinker, not because he romanticised nature, but because he understood its economic role. Nature sustains life. To destroy it for short-term gain is to liquidate the foundations of future prosperity.

Polluted rivers, scarred landscapes, poisoned air and degraded ecosystems may coincide with rising incomes, but they represent a net loss. Ruskin would have recognised modern climate breakdown as the ultimate expression of illth: the conversion of planetary stability into private profit.

An economy that cannot distinguish between income and ecological ruin is not miscalculating. It is self-destructing.

### ***Illth and inequality***

Illth is not evenly distributed. Its benefits accrue to those with power; its costs are imposed on those without. Poor housing, unsafe work, polluted environments and social insecurity disproportionately affect the least wealthy.

Ruskin saw inequality as both a cause and a consequence of illth. Concentrated wealth allows harm to be outsourced. Distance insulates the beneficiaries. The economy appears successful precisely because its costs are hidden, displaced or deferred.

Illth thrives in unequal societies because those who profit are shielded from what they destroy.

### ***Why illth persists***

Illth persists because it is politically convenient. It allows growth narratives to continue without confronting damage. It permits elites to celebrate success while denying responsibility. It transforms harm into externality and calls it efficiency.

Ruskin understood that an economy which cannot name illth cannot govern itself. Once damage is excluded from accounting, there is no internal brake on destruction. The system accelerates until it collides with physical or social limits.

### ***What answering the John Ruskin Question would require***

To take illth seriously would require a fundamental reorientation of economic thought and policy. At minimum, that would involve:

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Explicitly identifying illth by recognising activities that generate social, human or ecological harm as economic negatives, regardless of profitability.

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Reforming national accounting by moving beyond GDP to measures that distinguish life-sustaining activity from life-destroying activity. Positives and negatives have to be recognised as such.

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Embedding labour dignity as an economic criterion by treating degrading work as economic failure, and not as efficiency.

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Accounting for ecological damage as capital destruction, not as an external cost.

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Reframing inequality as systemic risk, because illth concentrates harm and destabilises society.

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Reasserting moral judgment in economics and acknowledging that not all income is legitimate and not all growth is good.

These steps would not moralise economics. They would make it honest, and the accounting true and fair.

## ***Inference***

The John Ruskin Question forces us to confront a truth that modern economics has spent two centuries evading: some supposed wealth makes us poorer. Illth is not a fringe concept. It is everywhere: in environmental collapse, degraded work, social fragmentation and rising insecurity, all coexisting with rising monetary output.

Ruskin saw that an economy which cannot distinguish between wealth and illth will eventually destroy the conditions of its own existence. His warning was not sentimental. It was forensic. We now see all the evidence to learn from what he had to say, all around us.

To answer his question is to accept that economics must once again learn to tell the difference between gain and damage and stop rewarding the latter in the name of progress.

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