What does it mean to redefine prosperity? A theory of definition for pathways to sustainable futures

Nikolay Mintchev

Published online: 16 May 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ⏎

View related articles ⏎

View Crossmark data ⏎

What does it mean to redefine prosperity? A theory of definition for pathways to sustainable futures

Nikolay Mintchev

Institute for Global Prosperity, University College London, London, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of literature arguing that we need to redefine prosperity – to move away from prosperity as economic wealth, and towards a new definition as quality of life for people and planet. While much work has been done on theories and methods for building sustainable prosperity, the process of redefinition at the level of meaning has received significantly less attention. Current arguments for redefining prosperity do not have a theory of definition despite raising multiple conceptual questions about what exactly is being redefined, what the conditions for redefining it are, and what the relationship is between redefining the word and redefining the thing. The article addresses these questions by developing a much-needed theory of definition for today's debates on prosperity. It claims that the redefinition of prosperity is not a substitute of one definiens with another but a reconfiguration of elements in what Adorno called "a horizon of associations" at the levels of both language and social reality.

What does it mean to redefine something? New theories in academic writing are often articulated and presented in the mode of a redefinition. The array of concepts that have been redefined across different academic disciplines is vast, ranging from psychosocial care (Sockalingam, Leung, and Cassin 2020), mental illness (Jabr 2012) and critical illness (Maslove et al. 2022; Pelaia, Shojaei, and McLean 2023), to advertising (Kerr and Richards 2021), vulnerability (The Lancet 2020), masculinity (Enderstein and Boonzaier 2015; Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 2007), and power relations in agri-food systems (Rossi, Bui, and Marsden 2019), just to name a few examples. The present article is specifically concerned with the concept of prosperity, and the practice of redefining prosperity, which is at the centre of a growing intellectual and policy conversation on how to create pathways to sustainable futures.

The need to redefine prosperity is usually evoked to signal a move away from a dominant definition of prosperity as economic wealth and GDP-growth, and towards a new definition that prioritises quality of life for people and planet (e.g. Cassiers 2015;

Jackson 2017; Maxton and Randers 2016; McKeet 2019; Moore 2015; Moore and Mintchev 2023; Moore and Woodcraft 2019; SEI & CEEW 2022; Sender et al. 2020; Soper 2020, Chapter 6; Sustainable Development Commission 2003). As Henrietta Moore argues,

> The redefinition of prosperity as a set of systemically interlinked political and social projects will require us to reshape how social and environmental impacts are conceived, measured and managed. It will potentially change the theory and practice of development by moving us away from the mainstream models of economic development based on growth assumptions. […] The focus would be on how to develop new cultural forms in diverse contexts, socially innovative forms of ethical engagement, both within and between communities. (Moore 2015, 804)

The argument for redefining prosperity (or sometimes rethinking, reinventing, reconceptualising or redesigning prosperity) is that a wealth/growth-focused model is not only unsustainable (because nothing material can grow infinitely), but also insufficient for addressing the big challenges of the twenty-first century. From climate change and environmental degradation to the erosion of good quality jobs and public services, we (as individuals, communities, cities, countries, and a planet) are facing problems that cannot be solved with bigger economies. It is for this reason that we need a new definition of prosperity – a definition that relinquishes what Bob Costanza (2022) refers to as our addiction to growth, and emphasises instead the need for innovative economic models, policies and mechanisms for social change that improve quality of life in a just and sustainable fashion.

There is an extensive body of literature that critiques the notion of prosperity as economic wealth and growth, and proposes various theories, methods, and metrics for understanding prosperity in its redefined form (Moore et al. 2023; see also Dalziel, Saunders, and Saunders 2018; Institute for Public Prosperity Research 2018; Jackson 2017; Jover and Wall 2019; Mintchev et al. 2019). There has also been a lot of pushback and resistance to the idea that prosperity can be achieved without growth, including sharp rejections and dismissals from political stakeholders, policymakers and media (see Jackson 2017: Prologue). One topic that has received a lot less attention, however, is the process of redefinition and what it entails. The idea of redefining any concept, including prosperity, is a philosophically challenging one and it raises a number of unsettling questions that have both theoretical and methodological significance. The present article aims to address three questions that I think must be clarified for a theoretically robust and consistent understanding of the redefinition of prosperity.

1. The process of redefinition is usually understood as substituting one definition with another (or one definiens with another, to be more precise). This linguistic operation, however, creates a demand for a third term based on the common denominator of the two definitions – a foundational shared element that allows the concept to maintain its identity in the face of definitional change (something that allows prosperity to still be prosperity after it is redefined, rather than becoming something else that requires a different name). Put slightly differently, the need for this third term emerges when we have to explain what exactly we are redefining when we redefine prosperity. How, then, do we resolve the tension between multiple levels of definition, given that as soon as we claim to create a new definition of prosperity, we simultaneously

create demand for another, higher-level, definition of the concept as something that encompasses both the old and the new definitions (a need for a definition of prosperity as something that encompasses the two definitions as wealth and as flourishing)?

This question is particularly pertinent for prosperity as a novel category of academic and policy discourse that not all audiences are familiar with. While the meanings of more familiar concepts (such as that of economy, for example), tend to be intuitively understood even in the absence of a clear definition (Mintchev and Moore 2023, 58), the novelty of debates about prosperity often elicits questions about what prosperity means, not least from students. In the context of conversations about redefinition, this could be about what prosperity means prior to being redefined, after being redefined, or as something more general – an overarching category that encompasses both versions pre and post redefinition. To answer the question above, I emphasise that we need to change the lens through which we understand definitions altogether; we ought to relinquish any assumption that the redefinition of prosperity is a linear replacement of one singular and fixed definition with another (Mintchev and Moore 2023). The position that I adopt in this article is that prosperity, both before and after it is redefined, is a multi-dimensional concept that combines various terms associated with narrow notions of economic affluence and broader notions of thriving. I subsequently elaborate this point using Theodor Adorno's (2017, 198) notion of definition as a "horizon of associations" – a multitude of meanings that form a dynamic and complex whole – which in turn allows us to see redefinition as a reconfiguration of elements in an assemblage, rather than the replacement of one singular element by another.

2. Why are some concepts (e.g. vulnerability, masculinity, economic development, prosperity …) more susceptible to redefinition than others (e.g. walking, paper, mountain …)?

This question is addressed by drawing on recent research in psychology on concrete and abstract concepts (e.g. Borghi et al. 2017; Villani et al. 2019; Dove 2021; Löhr 2022). While concrete concepts have referents that are bounded and well-defined, abstract multi-dimensional concepts can refer to a multitude of things, meaning that they can only be understood concretely when they are articulated and understood in context (both semantic context and cultural context). A general definition of prosperity must remain open to multiple interpretations and adaptable to different contexts because any fixing of the definition amounts to an oversight, if not negation, of the complexity of the concept, the ways in which it is contested by people holding different political views, and the changing nature of the processes and experiences that it represents. As I argue in the last part of the article, it is only context-specific operational definitions that can be detailed and concrete, but these too have to be open to transformation in response to social change. The complex and abstract nature of concepts such as prosperity makes redefinition possible, but this also means that a robust understanding of prosperity must include multiple definitions that link different scales, including the context-specific meso level where manifestations of prosperity appear in concrete forms (Moore and Mintchev 2023).

3. The process of redefining a concept requires stipulating or proposing a new definition. Yet, definitions of concepts that correspond to things in the social and material world are explicative, meaning that they describe the objective features of things in the world, rather than proposing or stipulating new features (see Watson 1985). How, then, is it possible to redefine something if this entails at once proposing a new definition in language and explicating the features of an objective reality that cannot be reduced to language?

To address this question, I turn to the relationship between nominal and real levels of definition (i.e. the level of defining words and their uses, and that of defining things in the social and material world). I argue that the two levels should be understood neither as separate, nor as identical, but as converging and diverging in different ways depending on whether we are talking about concrete or abstract concepts. Building on the discussion of complexity and abstractness/concreteness, I claim that the distinction between the real and the nominal becomes blurred when we deal with abstract and multi-dimensional concepts: the reference of such concepts cannot be delineated arbitrarily and independently of social and material conditions, but nor could it be established independently of linguistic and cultural constructs. The redefinition of prosperity, I argue, is both a real and a nominal process, involving transformation in discourse, as well as new configurations of governance, action, and experience in social and material reality.

In the concluding section of the article, I turn to the methodological question of how prosperity, as a category that is neither singular nor fixed, can be the subject of programmes for research and action. I argue that to do this we must produce operational definitions at the meso level, while at the same time emphasising the intersection of definitions at different scales as a mechanism of avoiding a slip into arbitrariness.

Multiplicity, problematisation, horizon

As a starting point for theorising the redefinition of prosperity, it is useful to highlight that prosperity is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses multiple associations of material wealth and more holistic notions of flourishing and thriving. Consider for example the top terms that people associate with prosperity according to the University of South Florida's Free Association Norms data base (Nelson, McEvoy, and Schrreiber 1998): in order of frequency of association, the terms are "rich," "money," "wealth," "success," "gain," "grow," "happy," "well," "better," "enhance," "fail," "flourish," "future," "inherit," "perish," "profit," "progress," and "thrive."

One point that is particularly important for understanding these association in the context of current conversations about redefining prosperity is that the two aspects of the concept as (1) narrowly material (rich, money, wealth …) and (2) doing well in broader terms (enhance, happy, flourish, thrive …), have a relationship that is historically contingent and variable, meaning that they can converge and diverge depending on forms of economic, social and environmental governance. A primary concern for much of the literature on redefining prosperity is that economic growth today – more so than during the second half of the twentieth century – is not just incapable of improving quality of life for people and planet, but actively detrimental to it; the two aspects of prosperity are disconnected and moving further apart from one another, both at a global level

and within most high-income countries (see Jackson 2017; Moore and Woodcraft 2019; Moore and Mintchev 2023). The growing rupture between being economically wealthy and doing well in other respects indicates that what was previously a unified experience of being wealthy and doing well is now fractured and problematic: we are at once rich, yet not thriving; wealthy, yet not flourishing; growing, yet not doing well; prosperous, yet not prosperous. This growing contradiction and its various expressions (at the individual, meso, national and global levels) pose a problem for lived experience, but also for discourse and conceptual analysis; addressing the contradiction requires new practices, policies, and visions for recovery from the multitude of catastrophes that we are facing, as well as new discourses and categories to think through the rupture and articulate worthwhile futures beyond the dogmas of economic growth.

Michel Foucault's (2000) notion of problematisation – the process through which something becomes articulated as a problem – is particularly useful for understanding this fracture in experience as the catalyst for the emergence of the new academic debates on prosperity, and for the articulation of prosperity as an object of thought, discourse, research and action. Problematisation, according to Foucault, begins with social, economic or political difficulties that create disruption and uncertainty about hitherto familiar processes:

> for a domain of action, a behavior, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it. These elements result from social, economic and political processes. But here their only role is that of instigation. (2000, 117–118)

Objective conditions, for Foucault, open up the possibility to think in new ways about the disrupted process, to understand it as a problem, and subsequently to begin devising responses – often multiple and contradictory – to address the emergent difficulties. The fissure between being wealthy and being able to secure a good future is the objective condition for the emergence of prosperity as a new kind of problem; it is the instigator, to use Foucault's language. This fissure instigates the renewed discourse about prosperity in research and policy, with its emphasis on redefining prosperity. The new discourse is both an attempt to articulate the problem of rupture and to set a course toward solutions. It aims to articulate the problem because the concept of prosperity is one that captures both wealth and thriving, and so it brings to the fore the lived experience of the incommensurability between the two in the present moment. Here, the concept of prosperity enters the conversation as already fractured and disrupted, as a reflection of the disruption of lived experience and a mechanism for bringing this disruption into the domain of thought, and eventually of research and action. At the same time, the new discourse on prosperity also aims to articulate pathways to solutions because it allows us to think about new ways of flourishing by moving away from the dogmas of growth and wealth which are failing to deliver on quality of life for people and planet.

So what theory of definition do we need to understand prosperity as a fractured and disrupted concept and experience? The intuitive view that redefining prosperity means replacing one singular definition (or definiens) with another is not relevant here because at the semantic level prosperity encompasses multiple notions before and after being redefined. The singularity of the signifier – the fact that we have a single word to represent the complex and multiple experience of prosperity – creates a

semblance of conceptual unity that covers over and conceals the conceptual and experiential multiplicity of prosperity (Mintchev and Moore 2023, 60–61), and this semblance of unity has to be rejected in the kinds of definitions that we advance.

One solution to this problem is to follow Theodor Adorno in theorising definition as a "horizon of associations" (2017, 198). This phrase appears only once in Adorno's text, but it is particularly apt for characterising his theory of definition (2017, 194–207) and so it warrants highlighting. The concept of horizon has a long history in philosophical thought and has been theorised in a number of different ways (Geniusas 2020; see also Gadamer 2004, 313–318; Kuhn 1940). The metaphor of horizon, as I understand it in the context of definition, evokes a field of vision in which objects (associations, in this case) can be closer or further away from the observer, eventually disappearing into (or appearing from) the distance. Although there is a fading away of objects into the distance, there is no clear or concrete boundary separating the objects that are closer from those that are further away, nor is there a barrier that prevents the disappearance and appearance of objects. Additionally, the scope of the horizon is open to change and so are the objects that the field of vision encompasses: we can expand or contract our horizons, and we can have different horizons depending on our vantage point.

A few pages later in the same text, Adorno uses another metaphor when he refers to definitions as magnets: "the sense and point of definitions, of philosophical definitions […] is precisely to generate […] magnetic fields without arresting the movement of the concept" (2017, 201). Here, again, the magnetic field of meanings and associations implies that a definition is more closely associated with some meanings than with others, but it is not closed off from the more distant elements. Rather than being clear-cut and bounded, definitions encompass multiple associations, some of them more central than others, and this allows them to retain the possibility of transformation. To redefine prosperity in line with this view of definition means to rearrange or reconfigure the associations within the field of meaning. If prosperity is a combination of associations signifying narrowly conceived financial worth (rich, money, wealth) and more holistic experiences of positive being in the world (happy, well, flourish, thrive), then to redefine prosperity means to prioritise the more holistic terms by bringing them to the forefront of discursive practice and social action.

Concrete and abstract concepts

A second important point for understanding the redefinition of prosperity is that the latter can only be understood in concrete terms when it is considered in contexts, both semantically (specifying how a term is used in the context of a specific discourse) and socially/culturally (specifying how it is experienced in a given time and place). Without specification of the challenges and possibilities for change that are present in a given context, prosperity remains an abstract notion, similar to concepts such as art, beauty, culture, economy, freedom, justice, love, society, truth, and so forth. Notice here that many of the terms that prosperity is associated with (success, happy, enhance, flourish, progress, thrive, etc.) are also abstract and can mean different things depending on the context. The distinction between abstract and concrete concepts has received significant attention in recent years, particularly in the psychological sciences (e.g. Borghi et al. 2017; Villani et al. 2019; Dove 2021; Löhr 2022). Concrete concepts that represent objects or actions (e.g.

book, sunflower, walking …) can be linked to clearly identifiable referents that are clearly delineated, envisaged, and perceived through the senses, without the need for contextualisation or specification. Abstract concepts, in contrast, do not have referents that are identifiable in such a way, nor can they be visualised as easily. This means that our understanding of abstract concepts has to be tied to specific contexts that supply the information we need to understand and envisage them in a more concrete fashion. As Guy Dove puts it, "abstract concepts tend to be more context-dependent than concrete concepts. Because abstract concepts are less directly tied to our immediate experiences of category members, their referents tend to be more dispersed across contexts" (Dove 2021, 184). Or yet again, as Anna Borghi and colleagues explain,

> Concrete and abstract words do not represent a dichotomy, even if they differ. All concepts are highly dependent on context and are variable. However, abstract concepts are less stable over time and are more shaped by current life experiences, situations, and culture compared with concrete concepts […]. Moreover, abstract concepts are also by far the most variable: people agree more with one another when asked to define, produce associations, or generate characteristics for "chair" than for "truth" or "love." (Borghi et al. 2017, 263–264)

What is interesting here is that the concreteness and abstractness of words can be measured. A quick look at the University of Western Australia's MCR Psycholinguistic Database allows us to see how prosperity compares to other concepts in terms of concreteness, as defined through the amalgamation of multiple scales, the Pavio, Colerado, and Gilhooly-Logie norms (for a detailed account of the methodology, see Clark 1997). Table 1 juxtaposes prosperity with a number of conceptually related terms (economy, happiness, success, justice, flourish, wealth, money) and non-related concrete terms (animal, horse, fruit, apple) that I have included as examples of terms from the other end of the concreteness spectrum. In addition to a concreteness score (CNC), the table shows a familiarity score (FAM) for each word. All scores are presented on a scale of 100–700, with slight differences in the ranges for CNC (min: 158; max: 670; mean: 438; s.d. 120) and FAM (min: NA; max: 657; mean: 488; s.d. 99).

The concept of prosperity, as expected, is not as concrete as physical objects and object categories, but it still scores higher on concreteness than economy, happiness, and success, probably because of its partial association with money and monetary wealth. At the same time, prosperity scores much lower on familiarity, suggesting that

Table 1. Concreteness and familiarity of prosperity and related terms according to MCR Psycholinguistics Database, arranged from the least to the most concrete.

WORD	CNC	FAM
ECONOMY	284	580
HAPPINESS	295	581
SUCCESS	295	568
PROSPERITY	301	477
JUSTICE	307	522
FLOURISH	323	415
WEALTH	370	557
MONEY	574	631
ANIMAL	587	620
FRUIT	612	590
HORSE	613	560
APPLE	620	598

although it is no less abstract than terms such as economy or happiness, it is more likely to elicit demands for a definition, especially in the context of academic or policy debates where conceptual precision is important.

The two points that I have emphasised about multiplicity and concreteness raise the question of how we can define and redefine a concept that is (1) multi-dimensional, and contradictory, encompassing both material wealth and broader forms of thriving, and (2) relatively abstract, unless it is understood in context. A singular and fixed definition is not sufficient and there has to be a range of definitions that refer to different scales, including meso-level social, cultural and economic contexts, that enable us to understand prosperity in concrete terms. An approach to definition that insists on multiplicity of meanings and scales might seem counter-intuitive, but the alternative is to either have a definition that is too general to tell us anything significant about prosperity, or one that is too narrow and thereby fixes or even fetishises the concept by presenting one variation or instance in place of a complex and dynamic whole.

Unfixing definition beyond the real and nominal

Adorno's critique of definitions offers a useful elaboration of this last problem of fixing. A key conceptual challenge here is that definitions cannot be understood simply at the level of language. Instead, they have to be considered at the intersection of language and reality; they are both articulations set up in language that are flexible and agile, and, at the same time, also explications that capture the features of objective realities in the social and material world. The problem of fixing and unfixing definitions in language is a problem of how definitions relate to things in the world.

Adorno's critique of definitions (2017, 194–207) begins with the point that a concept can be determined in two ways: either through ostension (or a "deictic" approach as he calls it), which entails pointing to an example of the thing represented by the concept; or alternatively, through a "definitional" approach in which the meaning of the concept is described using other concepts. The ostensive/deictic approach works well with highly concrete concepts that have a bounded referent, but less so with more abstract concepts, and it is precisely the latter that are fundamental for social analysis and social action in a complex and changing world. For Adorno, the multi-dimensional and historically changing nature of concepts such as class and society means that it is impossible to capture such concepts with a precise definition that encompasses all their elements and applies to all places and at all times:

> if we had to show by direct reference to the object itself, let us say, what "class" or "society" is […] we would certainly find ourselves at a loss, not simply because it would require an end-lessly mediated process in order to show people what class is, but also and pre-eminently because these concepts themselves are so complexly structured […] that we cannot get away simply by referring or pointing to the object or state of affairs in question. And as a rule these are precisely the concepts which – as philosophers, and especially Hegel and Nietzsche, have objected – effectively elude definition because they involve a historical content which cannot be reified or tied down […]. (Adorno 2017, 197)

The mentions of Hegel and Nietzsche here are significant. Both philosophers, as different as their conceptions of history are, agree that historically changing political categories –

right in the case of Hegel's analysis (2008), punishment in the case of Nietzsche's (2007) – cannot be expressed sufficiently in the form of a definition. In Nietzsche's words, "all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated defy definition; only something which has no history can be defined" (2007, 53; see also Adorno 2017, 306–307). Adorno, however, goes even further in his critique, arguing that the practice of producing stable and fixed definitions has ethical implications as well. For him, fixing concepts from the outset of a discussion or an inquiry can become a way of manipulating the discussion in the name of a misguided search for semantic security, and the consequence of such fixing is an evasion of reflection about concepts and the matters they represent (2007, 197).

What we need, then, is an account of definitions that enhances our understanding of concepts without reifying or fixing them – an account that is sensitive to the movements and changes that take place in social and material reality. Adorno insists that neither a nominalist nor a realist approach to definitions is sufficient to prevent fixing and to capture the movement of a concept and of reality. To do this, we need a theory of definition that combines the two levels and understands both their unity and their difference. The conceptual distinction between nominal and real definitions is an important one for understanding what definitions are, and how different approaches to definition affect analysis and action: a nominal definition is a definition of the word, referring to the way a particular word is used; a real definition is a definition of the thing, referring to the features and attributes of a phenomenon in the social and material world (e.g. Watson 1985; Robinson 1950; Fetzer, Shatz, and Schlesinger 1991). A purely nominal approach to definitions – one in which concepts are determined by other concepts with no point of grounding or reference to the world outside of language – risks a slide into conceptual relativism, whereby concepts are delineated and defined in an arbitrary fashion. For Adorno, this position is unacceptable because it implies that the content of the concept is entirely determined by the community of speaking subjects and the definition they bestow upon it: "it is a nominalist error to believe that every concept we employ is a *tabula rasa* which can be transformed into a richly furnished table only by virtue of our definitions" (2017, 198).

As we know from Saussure (1974), the relationship between signifier and signified – between the sound pattern and concept that together make up the sign – is arbitrary. The relationship between concepts and the social and material world, however, is not. Signs, within the structuralist model, acquire their meaning first and foremost through a relation of differentiation vis-à-vis other signs in the system. But this system is not closed off and detached from the world, and as Ricoeur (2003, 85) has pointed out, the practice of reference – of pointing to and addressing things in the world – constitutes a moment in which language goes beyond itself, passes outside of itself as a system of signs, and connects with the world outside of the system. Concepts may only be able to acquire meaning if they are differentiated from other concepts within the structure of language, as structuralist and post-structuralist approaches have taught us, but this differentiation is not the sole determinant of meaning, and it certainly is not independent from the social and material world outside of language.

But if a purely nominalist approach to definitions in untenable, so is a purely realist approach. Concepts – and language more generally – are not simply representations of reality that act as what Richard Rorty (2009) calls "a mirror of nature," a mere reflection

of the reality of the world. In addition, they also organise our perceptions and understandings of the world, and animate our actions in it (Mintchev and Moore 2023, 57–62). Naming, labelling, or defining something in a particular way – turning it into an object of knowledge and discourse – can lead to profound changes in how we perceive and experience the object in question and how we act upon it. A definition that claims to be a real definition is never just an explication of reality; it is also a performative gesture that has transformational effects in the material and social world. So, while a nominalist approach to definition risks foreclosing reference and allowing arbitrary articulation – and possibly reification – emanating solely from the agency of speakers, a realist approach risks an oversight of agency on the assumption that definitions reflect fixed and stable essences.

The distinction between nominal and real definitions might be clear-cut at the level of theory, but in practice it can appear and disappear at different moments. In his study of Socratic definitions, Jeffrey Gold (1985) suggests that "when we give a definition of something within the context of a theory, it is difficult to distinguish a real definition from a nominal definition" (Gold 1985, 576). Gold illustrates this point with the example of water as defined from colloquial and scientific perspectives:

> Our ordinary, non-scientific definition of water as a "colorless, drinkable liquid" is both a definition of the word "water" (i.e. a nominal definition which reports the usage of the word in our common sense framework or theory) and a definition of the object, water (i.e. a real definition). Similarly, a scientific definition of water as "H20" is both a report of the usage of the word "water" in the scientific framework or theory and a definition of the object. (1985, 576–577)

Following this example, Gold moves on to consider Socratic dialogue and inquiry. He argues that although Socrates intended for his definitions to be real definitions, once we account for the cultural and theoretical context in which Socrates explored the nature of various objects – virtue, justice, courage, fear, etc. – the distinction between nominal and real definitions disappears. As Gold explains, Socrates's method of inquiry relies on the heterogeneity and complexity of meaning of words as a starting point for understanding the nature of things and persuading his interlocutors of the truth of specific definitions. Even if Socrates's arguments initially appear counter-intuitive, the fact that he derives them from shared meanings that are accepted by both himself and his interlocutors allows him to generate lines of reasoning that his interlocutors can identify with.

> When Socrates asked his "What is X?" questions, these questions did not occur in a vacuum, but within the context of the 5th century Greek way of looking at things. A major strategy of the early dialogues is for Socrates to get his interlocutors to reflect upon their own beliefs and concepts in order that they may come to recognize connections and conflicts among their own concepts which they never recognized before. […] Socrates thinks that his own views, however counter-intuitive they appear, follow from ordinary Greek views about morality. It also seems true that ordinary Greek views about morality are inextricably tied to the Greek concepts of justice, courage, and the rest. These concepts are also tied to how the Greeks used the words "δικαιοσύνη" [dikaiosyni], "ἀνδρεία" [andreia], and the rest. Surely, when Socrates defined fear as expectation of future evil […], he took himself to be characterizing what fear really is, but it is equally clear that he was depending upon his own concept of fear which could not be at variance with the ordinary way of using the word "δέος" [deos]. (Gold 1985, 577)

The two examples presented above – water, on the one hand, Socrates's objects of inquiry, on the other – are fundamentally different, despite being used by Gold to illustrate the same point about the unity of nominal and real definitions. Water is a concrete concept with a bounded referent. As such, the argument that nominal and real definitions are indistinguishable runs into difficulties when we account for the hypothetical scenario in which the real definition of water turns out to be false: what would happen in a possible world where a new discovery reveals that water only appears colourless because of an optical illusion, and we eventually realise that it is in fact another colour? What if it turns out that scientists had erred all along about water's molecular composition, realising that it is in fact something other than H20 (see Kripke 1980, 123–125)? In this hypothetical case, the nominal definition of water as a colourless substance with an H20 composition would still be true insofar as this is what the word was used to describe in practice. At the level of real definition, however, the definition would be false because it does not correspond to the objective properties of the object in question.

This dynamic of the real and the nominal changes, however, when we consider more abstract and multi-dimensional concepts such as justice, economy, community, or prosperity. In the case of such concepts – where we are dealing with a horizon of associations – we cannot imagine a possible world where we discover that the concept has different attributes from what we previously thought. We can say that we need a new theory of justice (e.g. Rawls 1971; Sen 2009) or a new understanding of what an economy is (e.g. an understanding that accounts for the knowledge economy, wellbeing economy, affective economy, economy of care, etc.), but it would make little sense, I think, to say that justice is in fact something different from what we previously thought or that we were objectively wrong about what the concept of economy means. The reason for this is that abstract and multi-dimensional concepts do not have bounded referents with natural properties that can be understood in the same way as those of natural objects. What we do imagine, instead, is a world in which we are required to revise our understandings and definitions in line with contextual demands, without being able to make judgements about whether a definition is true or false in the correspondent sense of the term. The boundary between nominal and real definition becomes blurry here, as Gold suggests in his discussion of Socrates. With abstract concepts, a new real definition cannot be established with reference to concrete objects that exist independently of cultural and linguistic constructs. Defining and redefining abstract concepts in concrete terms requires contextualisation and a narrowing down of the reference, and this can only occur as a process of specification, negotiation and contestation of meanings. Understanding definition at the intersection of the nominal and the real ensures that our definitions of prosperity are adapted to address the ecological, economic and social challenges of the twenty-first century. Any future redefinition of prosperity must reflect the conditions and needs in which it is developed and remain iterative and adaptable in a world that is both changing and diverse.

Conclusion: intersecting definitions

The understanding of prosperity as neither singular nor stable raises the question of how we can create programmes of research and action for prosperity: what are the things that we are researching and creating? Who decides what should or should not be included

within the conceptual boundaries of prosperity? To answer, we must return to the point that the definition and redefinition of prosperity occur on multiple scales: abstract definitions as sustainable flourishing, thriving and quality of life, must be complemented with more concrete definitions specifying, on the one hand, the domain (or domains) of prosperity that we are focusing on within the broader vision of thriving (for example, economic, political, cultural, environmental, or social prosperity), and, on the other hand, the scale (or scales) at which we are researching it (e.g. global, national, city, neighbourhood, individual etc.). Different domains and scales are interconnected, but they are not identical, nor can they be studied all in the same way: for example, analyses of macroeconomic models for de-growth (e.g. Victor 2019) are quite different conceptually and methodologically from plans for universal basic service provisions for cities (Coote and Percy 2020), or participatory methodologies that engage citizens in small-scale solutions for their neighbourhoods (Jallad et al. 2022; Mintchev et al. 2022; Baumann et al. 2023).

It is important to emphasise here that the meso level is a site of particularly dense interactions that determine people's experiences of prosperity and quality of life, as well as the experience of intersection of different domains of prosperity (Moore and Mintchev 2023, 37). For example, macro-level definitions and analyses of economic prosperity or natural prosperity are important for understanding if and how resources can be managed in a more sustainable fashion, but it is analysis at the meso level that can tell us what a good quality and meaningful livelihood looks like for people, how people interact with their natural environments, or what possibilities there are for investing in economic initiatives for the regeneration of degraded ecosystems in different places. It is at this meso level that we can produce particularly rich concrete and multi-dimensional definitions and models of prosperity based on the heterogeneity of local experiences: see for example the prosperity models that have been developed by the Institute for Global Prosperity for meso-level sites in Beirut, London, and Dar Es Salaam, each with over fifteen relevant sub-domains, representing essential provisions for good quality of life in context (Moore and Mintchev 2023). The models in question amount to very concrete definitions, but they only represent what is relevant in a particular time and place, and are open to change. As such, they have to be understood in relation to larger systems, processes, and definitions of prosperity.

As Adorno argued, a robust methodology for empirical research requires not only a philosophical definition (understood as a horizon), but also an "operational definition" that "secures the applicability of the concept" (Adorno 2017, 202) – a definition designed to articulate the concept in a way that can be empirically studied or measured. Definitions for different scales intersect here so that more abstract and widely applicable concepts provide the structural support that makes operational definitions make sense and vice versa: without abstract definitions, concrete definitions have no conceptual grounding, risking a slip into arbitrariness; yet, without concrete definitions our understandings remain vague. Adorno made an argument very much along these lines with the example of prejudice in *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 2019):

> if you define "prejudice" as the behaviour of an individual who provides answers A, B, C, and D to propositions 1, 2, 3, and 4, such an interpretation would only be meaningful if you already possess a theory which goes beyond these propositions, which also situates the statements which constitute the definition […] If you do not proceed in such a way, you actually falsify the life which also inhabits a concept such as "prejudice." (Adorno 2017, 204)

The reason there is a risk of "falsification" is that without a theory or broader definition, there are no parameters to prevent operational definitions from slipping into arbitrariness. We need a framework of prosperity beyond the local level to know that a swimming pool in every house might improve people's lives in some ways and in some places, but it will not lead to sustainable prosperity at scale (see Moore and Mintchev 2023, 30). At the same time, the reverse is also true; without dense meso-level definitions, prosperity in the abstract sense can also slide into arbitrariness: what does thriving entail? Or doing well? Or being sustainable? These questions cannot be addressed in any meaningful way without reference to concrete lived experiences and the environments that shape them.

To conclude, I return to the point I made earlier that prosperity today has emerged as a problem because the experience of it as a combination of being economically affluent and generally thriving has lost its familiarity. What I would like to add here is that this lack of familiarity is only partial, and so the vision and promise that wealth will help us thrive is still haunting us and is still, in part, familiar. To redefine prosperity means to do things differently, but this does not mean to do things in an entirely new manner, as if aspirations and projects for sustainable flourishing were non-existent until now. The drive for material affluence might still be haunting us, but aspirations and projects for prospering in other ways that align with quality of life and sustainability are also widespread. It is these latter aspirations and projects that can help us envisage radically new forms of governance. Redefining prosperity means re-arranging our priorities towards more sustainable futures, while still following familiar aspirations and building on what we already have in terms of knowledge, networks and resources that can help us thrive. How exactly we do this depends on our contexts, the constraints and possibilities that these contexts bestow on us, and the decisions we make in what we do with these possibilities. We know that the old definition of prosperity no longer holds – we have new definitions leading us in new directions, and it is up to us to figure out what we are going to do with them and where exactly we will go.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Adorno, Theodor. 2017. *An Introduction to Dialectics*. Cambridge: Polity.
Adorno, Theodor, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford. 2019. *The Authoritarian Personality*. London: Verso.
Baumann, Hanna, Joana Dabaj, Nikolay Mintchev, Henrietta L. Moore, and Andrea Rigon. 2023. "Building Co-Designed Infrastructures in Lebanon's Spaces of Displacement." In *Prosperity in the Twenty-First Century: Concepts, Models and Metrics*, edited by Henrietta L. Moore, Matthew Davies, Nikolay Mintchev, and Saffron Woodcraft, 127–148. London: UCL Press.
Borghi, Anna, Ferdinand Binkofski, Cristiano Castelfrnchi, Felice Cimatti, Claudia Scorolli, and Luca Tummolini. 2017. "The Challenge of Abstract Concepts." *Psychological Bulletin* 143 (3): 263–292. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000089.
Cassiers, Isabelle, ed. 2015. *Redefining Prosperity*. London: Routledge.
Clark, Craig. 1997. "MCR Psycholinguistic Database." https://websites.psychology.uwa.edu.au/school/mrcdatabase/mrc2.html#CONC.
Coote, Anna, and Andrew Percy. 2020. *The Case for Universal Basic Services*. Cambridge: Polity.

Costanza, Robert. 2022. *Addicted to Growth: Societal Therapy for a Sustainable Wellbeing Future*. London: Routledge.

Dalziel, Paul, Caroline Saunders, and Joe Saunders. 2018. *Wellbeing Economics: The Capabilities Approach to Prosperity*. Basingstoke: London.

de Saussure, Ferdinand. 1974. *Course in General Linguistics*. Glasgow: Fontana.

Dove, Guy. 2021. "The Challenges of Abstract Concepts." In *Handbook of Embodied Psychology*, edited by Michael D. Robinson and Laura E. Thomas, 171–195. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Enderstein, A. M., and F. Boonzaier. 2015. "Narratives of Young South African Fathers: Redefining Masculinity through Fatherhood." *Journal of Gender Studies* 24 (5): 512–527. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2013.856751.

Fetzer, James, David Shatz, and George Schlesinger. 1991. *Definitions and Definability: Philosophical Perspectives*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Foucault, Michel. 2000. "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations." In *Ethics*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 111–119. London: Penguin.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. *Truth and Method*. London: Bloomsbury.

Geniusas, Saulius. 2020. "Horizon." In *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, edited by Daniele De Santis, Burt Hopkins, and Claudio Majolino, 221–230. London: Routledge.

Gold, Jeffrey. 1985. "Socratic Definition: Real or Nominal?" *Philosophy Research Archives* 10: 573–588. https://doi.org/10.5840/pra19841023.

Hegel, G. W. F. 2008. *Outline of the Philosophy of Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Institute for Public Prosperity Research. 2018. *Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy*. Cambridge: Polity.

Jabr, Ferris. 2012. "Redefining Mental Illness." *Scientific American Mind* 23 (2): 28–35. https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamericanmind0512-28.

Jackson, Tim. 2017. *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Jallad, Mayssa, Nikolay Mintchev, Elisabetta Pietrostefani, Mariam Daher, and Henrietta L Moore. 2022. "Citizen Social Science and Pathways to Prosperity: Co-Designing Research and Impact in Beirut, Lebanon." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 25 (6): 769–782. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1942664.

Jover, Margarita, and Alex Wall. 2019. *Ecologies of Prosperity for the Living City*. Virginia: Applied Research and Design Publishing.

Kerr, Gayle, and Jef Richards. 2021. "Redefining Advertising in Research and Practice." *International Journal of Advertising* 40 (2): 175–198. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1769407.

Kripke, Saul. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kuhn, Helmut. 1940. "The Phenomenological Concept of the 'Horizon.'" In *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, edited by Marvin Farber, 106–123. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

The Lancet. 2020. "Redefining Vulnerability in the Era of COVID-19." *The Lancet* 395 (10230): 1089. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30757-1.

Löhr, Guido. 2022. "What Are Abstract Concepts? On Lexical Ambiguity and Concreteness Ratings." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 13 (3): 549–566. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-021-00542-9.

Manley, Eric, Heidi Levitt, and Chad Mosher. 2007. "Understanding the Bear Movement in Gay Male Culture." *Journal of Homosexuality* 53 (4): 89–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360802103365.

Maslove, David M., Benjamin Tang, Manu Shankar-Hari, Patrick R. Lawler, Derek C. Angus, J. Kenneth Baillie, Rebecca M. Baron, et al. 2022. "Redefining Critical Illness." *Nature Medicine* 28 (6): 1141–1148. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-022-01843-x.

Maxton, Graeme, and Jorgen Randers. 2016. *Reinventing Prosperity: Managing Economic Growth to Reduce Unemployment, Inequality and Climate Change*. Vancouver: Greystone Books.

McKeet, Ivan. 2019. "Redefining Prosperity – Speech Delivered by Trade and Innovation Minister Ivan McKee on 26.09.19." https://blogs.gov.scot/scotlands-economy/2019/09/26/redefining-prosperity-speech-delivered-by-trade-and-innovation-minister-ivan-mckee-on-26-09-19/.

Mintchev, Nikolay, Hanna Baumann, Henrietta L. Moore, Andrea Rigon, and Joana Dabaj. 2019. "Towards a Shared Prosperity: Co-Designing Solutions in Lebanon's Spaces of Displacement." *Journal of the British Academy* 7 (S2): 109–135. https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/007s2.109.

Mintchev, Nikolay, Mariam Daher, Mayssa Jallad, Elisabetta Pietrostefani, Henrietta L Moore, Ghadir Ghamrawi, Assia Al Harrache, Amanie Majed, and Yara Younes. 2022. "Sustained Citizen Science from Research to Solutions: A New Impact Model for the Social Sciences." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (January): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221133232.

Mintchev, Nikolay, and Henrietta L. Moore. 2023. "The Discourses of Prosperity: Metaphors, Transformations and Pathways." In *Prosperity in the Twenty-First Century: Concepts, Models and Metrics*, edited by Henrietta L. Moore, Matthew Davies, Nikolay Mintchev, and Saffron Woodcraft, 25–47. London: UCL Press.

Moore, Henrietta. 2015. "Global Prosperity and Sustainable Development Goals." *Journal of International Development* 27 (6): 801–815. https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3114.

Moore, Henrietta L., Matthew Davies, Nikolay Mintchev, and Saffron Woodcraft, eds. 2023. *Prosperity in the Twenty-First Century: Concepts, Models and Metrics*. London: UCL Press.

Moore, Henrietta L, and Nikolay Mintchev. 2023. "What is Prosperity?" In *Prosperity in the Twenty-First Century: Concepts, Models and Metrics*, edited by Henrietta L. Moore, Matthew Davies, Nikolay Mintchev, and Saffron Woodcraft, 25–47. London: UCL Press.

Moore, Henrietta L., and Saffron Woodcraft. 2019. "Placing Sustainable Prosperity in East London: Local Meanings and 'Sticky' Measures of the Good Life." *City & Society* 31 (2): 275–298. https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12208.

Nelson, Douglas, Cathy McEvoy, and Thomas Schrreiber. 1998. "The University of South Florida Word Association, Rhyme, and Word Fragment Norms." http://w3.usf.edu/FreeAssociation/.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2007. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pelaia, Tiana M., Maryam Shojaei, and Anthony S. McLean. 2023. "The Role of Transcriptomics in Redefining Critical Illness." *Critical Care* 27 (1): 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13054-023-04364-2.

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 2003. *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*. London: Routledge.

Robinson, Richard. 1950. *Definition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rorty, Richard. 2009. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rossi, Adanella, Sibylle Bui, and Terry Marsden. 2019. "Redefining Power Relations in Agrifood Systems." *Journal of Rural Studies* 68 (May): 147–158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.01.002.

SEI and CEEW. 2022. *Stockholm+50: Unlocking a Better Future*. Stockholm Environment Institute. https://doi.org/10.51414/sei2022.011.

Sen, Amartya. 2009. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sender, Hannah, Mohammed Abdussamad Hannan, Luke Billingham, and Daniel Ocitti. 2020. *Rethinking Prosperity: Perspectives of Young People Living in East London*. London: Institute for Global Prosperity. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10100056/7/Sender_Rethinking%20Prosperity.pdf.

Sockalingam, Sanjeev, Samantha E. Leung, and Stephanie E. Cassin. 2020. "The Impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 on Bariatric Surgery: Redefining Psychosocial Care." *Obesity* 28 (6): 1010–1012. https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.22836.

Soper, Kate. 2020. *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism*. London: Verso.

Sustainable Development Comission. 2003. "Redefining Prosperity: Resource Productivity, Economic Growth and Sustainable Development." http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/data/files/publications/030627%20Redefining%20prosperity,%20resource%20productivity.pdf.

Victor, Peter. 2019. *Managing without Growth: Slower by Design, Not Disaster*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Villani, Caterina, Luisa Lugli, Marco Tullio Liuzza, and Anna Borghi. 2019. "Varieties of Abstract Concepts and Their Multiple Dimensions." *Language and Cognition* 11 (3): 403–430. https://doi.org/10.1017/langcog.2019.23.

Watson, Rita. 1985. "Towards a Theory of Definition." *Journal of Child Language* 12 (1): 181–197. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000900006309.