The debate on the growth-antigrowth theme has become a fashionable pastime over the last five years. And since its continued enjoyment must depend to a large extent on its inconclusiveness, it would be boorish as well as presumptuous to propose that we try to reach a settled conclusion. Not that I think there is much danger of that happening, however. The reverse is rather to be feared: that the present enjoyment in witnessing the continual conflicts of opinion will become marred by a growing sense of frustration—not so much a frustration at being unable to reach a firm conclusion as a frustration arising from repeated failure to organize our thoughts on the subject and to acquire perspective.

If I interpret the public mood rightly, the time has come to steer the debate away from rhetorical appeals and toward more direct confrontation—less bark and more bite is in order. I propose, therefore, that we define the issues more carefully than hitherto and, in the light of these defined issues, lay down the ground rules for a more searching investigation.

The physical possibility of sustained growth

There are two aspects to the debate that may be treated separately, though they will become linked in
any policy conclusion: first, whether continued economic growth is physically possible and, second, whether it is desirable.

Consider the physical possibility first. Obviously, we cannot begin without agreeing on some standard of measurement for economic growth. Are we to include population growth? Should GNP, or some variant of GNP, be used? What other indicators are there? Are we to include leisure?

There is another set of questions: Are we concerned with the economic growth of the world as a whole, or are we to confine ourselves to particular areas? And if the latter, are we to make any special assumptions about developments in the rest of the world?

Having agreed, let us suppose, to answers to these two sets of questions, we must then recognize that there exists a virtually unlimited number of possible paths of growth. If we were to consider the world as a whole, one in which human population was stabilized at, say, six billion people, we might discover—if we could foresee all major technological developments—that an average rate of growth of, say, 4 percent per annum would entail a collapse of civilization in 50 years' time, whereas an overall rate of growth of 2 percent per annum could be maintained for 200 years. Alternatively, we could generate a growth path that begins climbing steeply, only to taper off in a generation or so, after which it could continue at a low rate for centuries. Or we might discover that a 3 percent growth rate could be maintained almost indefinitely provided that it was concentrated in certain geographical areas, or provided that only certain types of technology were utilized, or provided a number of consumer services and gadgetry were scrapped.

I range over these hypothetical possibilities partly in order to uncover our woeful ignorance. We cannot, of course, foresee all major scientific and technologi-