On "Standards of Living and Modern Economic Growth," by John V. C. Nye

Here are five questions I came up with based on my reading of this article. The first is the kind of quotation that would be a candidate for the midterm test or final exam, the idea being that you would write a thoughtful paragraph or two in response to it. The rest are the kinds of questions that would be worth considering and answering if you chose to do an optional essay on this topic.

1. Here is a key quotation from Nye’s article: “the last few centuries have seen us banish starvation and famine from a large part of the Earth. In the most successful countries, the average citizen now enjoys a material standard of living that would have made the greatest king of two hundred years ago turn green with envy.” Question: Do you think Nye’s right that your standard of living is much higher? Why or why not?

2. How does one best judge material standard of living? For example, Nye mentions (1) improvements in life expectancy, (2) declines in mortality from disease, (3) quantity and quality of nutrition, (4) accumulation of capital, (5) availability of technologies. Should other criteria be added to the list?

3. Measuring wealth by money is useful but tricky due to factors such as inflation. So Nye suggests another measure: How much time an average person had to work to be able to buy a given thing. Do you find that method of measuring and the data in Table 1 useful or convincing?

4. One problem that Nye raises for measuring wealth across time is changes in quality. Televisions now, for example, are better quality than televisions from 50 years ago, even if they cost the same. How do you think we should measure quality improvements in measuring changes in wealth across time?

5. Despite the kind of data and arguments that Nye presents, some people are pessimistic, about our standards of living. How might one reasonably disagree with Nye’s claim that we have made great improvements?