



The Good Life: An International Perspective

Amitai Etzioni



Towards the end of 2012, the economic growth rates of China and India are falling sharply; the growth of the United States and Japan is anemic; the EU is on the edge of a recession. While the Arab Awakening is considered mainly a call for democratization, most citizens of the nations involved are keen to command higher standards of living, which may not be forthcoming. The IMF has warned that the global economy is headed toward its lowest growth rates since 2009 (Rushe and Inman 2012). Governments seem unable to find the economic tools that would restore the economy of their nations, and indirectly that of the world, to the levels enjoyed in previous decades. Historically, domestic upheavals and conflicts among nations occur not when they are most poor and oppressed, but when growth is lost and expectations are dashed. Indeed, one sees in many nations an increase in nationalism, xenophobia, racism, religious fanaticism, and extreme politics. The fact that inequality is rising very sharply in all the nations involved, adds further fuel to the sociologically combustible transnational condition.

If the people of the world cannot return to what is being called the “old normal” (paid for by strongly growing economies), what will the “new normal” look like? Will it simply be a frustrating and alienating scaled-back version of the old normal? Or will the people develop new concepts of what makes a good life, as they did in earlier historical periods? If successful, a recharacterization of the good life will allow people to make — to use a rather archaic turn of phrase — a silk purse out of a sow’s ear; in plain English, to turn their misery into an opportunity.

GOOD LIFE IN A HISTORICAL AND TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

People immersed in the consumerist culture that now prevails in large parts of the world's civilizations find it difficult to imagine a good life that is based on profoundly different values than those they live by. However, throughout history, different conceptions of what makes a good life have arisen. For instance, for centuries the literati of imperial China came to prominence not through acquisition of wealth, but through the pursuit of knowledge and cultivation of the arts. This group of scholar-bureaucrats dedicated their early lives to rigorous study, in preparation for the exams required for government service. They spent years memorizing the Confucian classics.

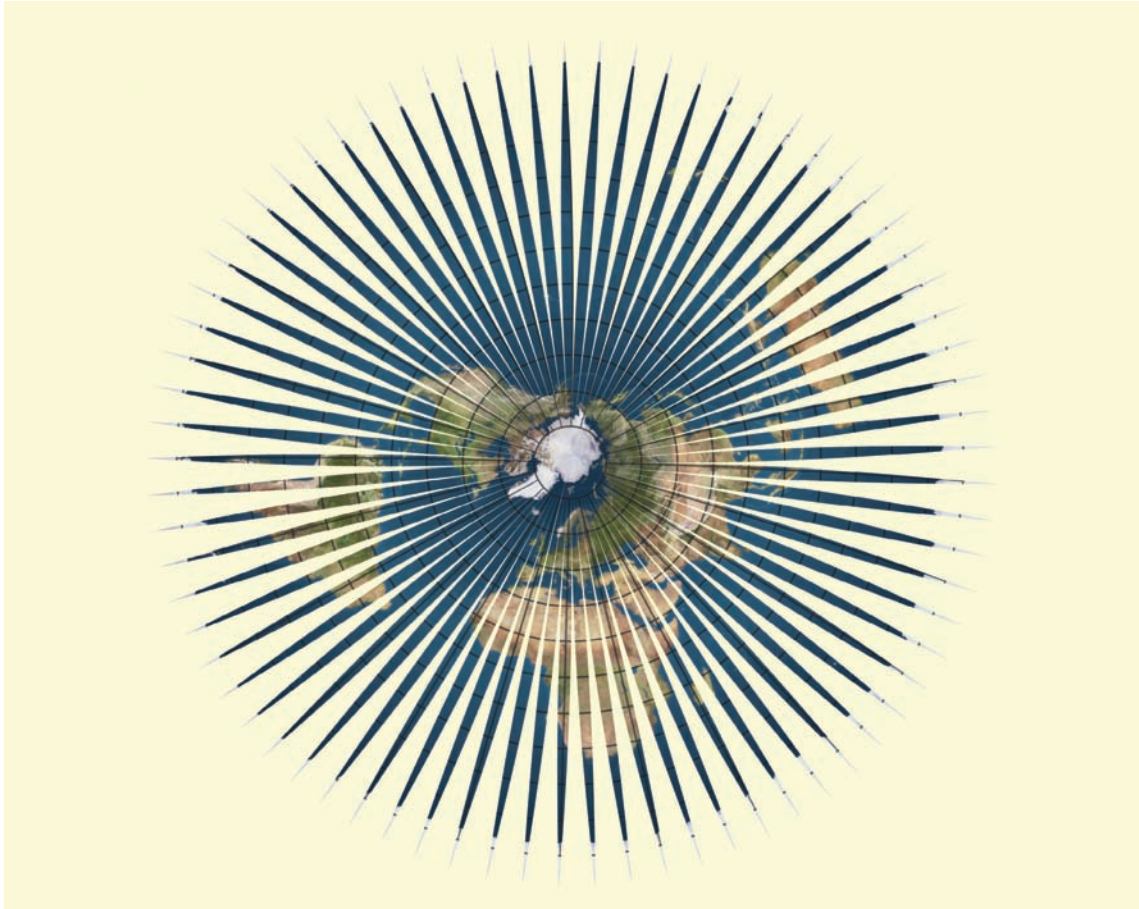
The literati, having passed the imperial exams, were qualified for government service, but instead elected to dedicate their lives to the arts, or retired early in order to follow artistic pursuits. They played music and composed poetry, learned calligraphy, and gathered with like-minded friends to share ideas and discuss great works of the past.

Sociologist Reinhard Bendix writes that in keeping with Confucian teachings, “the educated man must stay away from the pursuit of wealth ... because acquisitiveness is a source of social and personal unrest. To be sure, this would not be the case if the success of economic pursuits was guaranteed, but in the absence of such a guarantee the poise and harmony of the soul are jeopardized by the risks involved ... The cultured man strives for the perfection of the self, whereas all occupations that involve the pursuit of riches require a one-sided specialization that acts against the universality of the gentleman”(Bendix 1966).

During the Middle Ages, knights were expected to adhere to an exacting code of chivalry. The tenets they were expected to live by are well captured in *Song of Roland*, an 11th century poem. Throughout the poem, the worthy knight is shown to gladly and faithfully serve his liege lord, to protect the weak and the defenseless, to show proper reverence for God, to respect and honor women, to be truthful and steadfast, and to view financial reward with revulsion and disdain. In traditional Jewish communities, studying the Torah was considered the preferred way of life.

Even in recent Western history, there have been significant changes in what is viewed as the good life. One such major change occurred after the end of World War II. At the time, economists held that human beings had fixed needs and that once these were satisfied, people would consume no more. Moreover, economists noted that during World War II, the American productive capacity greatly expanded. They feared that with the end of the war, the idling of the assembly lines that produced thousands of tanks, planes, and many war-related materials would lead to massive unemployment — because there was nothing that the assembly lines could produce that people needed, given that their fixed needs were sated.

In this context, John Kenneth Galbraith came up with a solution. In his book *The Affluent Society*, he concedes that private needs were satisfied, but points out that the public sector



Jack van Wijk, *Azimuthal*

could absorb the “excess” capacity. It could be invested in public schools, parks, museums, and such.

Sociologist David Riesman published an influential essay, “Affluence for what?,” in which he suggested that the “surplus” be used for projects such as paying the people of New Orleans to continue to maintain their 1955 lifestyle so future generations of children could come and visit this sociological Disneyland to see what life was like in earlier ages, as they do in Williamsburg.

Instead, in the years that followed WWII, industrial corporations discovered that they could produce needs for the products they were marketing. For instance, first women and then men were taught that they smelled poor and needed to purchase deodorants. Men, who used to wear white shirts and grey flannel suits like a uniform, learned that they “had to” purchase a variety of shirts and suits, and that last year’s wear was not proper in the year that followed. The same was done for cars, ties, handbags, towels and sheets, sunglasses, watches, and

numerous other products. Vance Packard lays all of this out in his best-selling book, *The Hidden Persuaders*.

More generally, the good life was defined as having a high and rising level of consumption, in the sense that a person could never consume enough. There was always a new smartphone, flat-screen TV, or this year's fashionable towels and sheets that the person "needed."

Less often noted, probably because it is so self evident, is that paying for the high level of consumption requires hard work. Initially, mainly the husbands worked to provide for the family, leaving little time and energy for other pursuits, including being with their family, a lifestyle depicted in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In later decades, as more and more women joined the labor force, the incomes from husband and wife combined went to paying for the high-consumption lifestyle. More and more people began to take their work home with them, even on holidays, courtesy of Blackberries and their equivalents.

In short, there is nothing natural or unavoidable about what is considered the affluent life: it entails the kind of lifestyle that was considered worthy of contempt by previous societies and in early historical periods of the West.

REPLACING VERSUS CAPPING

Criticisms of consumerism, materialism, and hedonism are at least as old as capitalism and found in the West and not just in the East. Numerous social movements and communities have pursued other forms of the good life within capitalist societies. The Shakers, who left Manchester for America in the 1770s, founded religious communities characterized by a simple ascetic lifestyle.¹ Other such communities (some secular, some religious) include the Brook Farm Institute, the Harmony Society, the Amana Colonies, and the Amish. In Britain, John Ruskin founded the Guild of St. George in the 1870s, which he intended to guide the formation of agrarian communities that would lead a simple and modest life. Jewish refugees who emigrated to Palestine starting early in the 20th century established *kibbutzim*, in which the austere life was considered virtuous, consumption was held down, communal life promoted, and advancing a socialist and Zionist agenda was a primary goal of life. Numerous religious orders also started with an ascetic life.

In the 1960s, a counterculture (hippie) movement rose on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Its core values were anti-consumerism, communal living, equality, environmentalism, free love,

1. "The Shakers," *National Park Service*, <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/shaker/shakers.htm>

and pacifism. Timothy Leary encapsulated the hippie ethos when he advised a crowd to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.”² The British iteration of the hippie movement manifested itself in London’s underground culture, a “community of like-minded anti-establishment, anti-war, pro-rock’n’roll individuals, most of whom had a common interest in recreational drugs,” and many of whom opted out of mainstream consumerist culture.³

Many of these movements and communities sought to buy out of both the consumption and work system of capitalism and to form an alternative universe committed to ascetic life, while dedicating themselves to transcendental activities, including spiritual, religious, political, or social elements. They sought to replace capitalism rather than to cap it and graft onto it a different society.

Most important: practically all of these movements and communities failed to lay a foundation for a new contemporary society, let alone civilization, and practically all of them either disintegrated, shriveled, or lost their main alternative features. It seems that there is something in ascetic life that most people cannot abide for the longer run. It hence seems that if the current environment calls for a new attempt to form a society less centered around consumption, the endeavor will have to graft the new conception of a good life onto the old one. That is, not seek to replace consumption but to cap it and channel the resources and energy thus freed into other pursuits.

Once one approaches the subject at hand through this lens, one finds millions of people who have already moved in this direction, although they are hardly following a vision of a new good society nor do they come together to promote it. These millions include a large number of senior citizens who retired before they had to, to allow more time for alternative pursuits. These seniors typically lead what might be called a comfortable life from a materialistic viewpoint, but they spend more of their time socializing and engaged in politically active, spiritual, and cultural pursuits, rather than continuing to be employed and consume full throttle. (Note: by definition those who retire early earn less than those who continue to work, and hence they either consume less or leave less of a bequest, which limits the consumption of their families.) The same holds for the millions of women who decide not to return to work after they have children, at least until they reach school age, and many for much longer, even though this means that they will have to consume less.

As these two large groups (as well as those who drop out of high-earning pursuits to follow a more “meaningful” life — say, as teachers for those less privileged) illustrate, one need not lead a life of sack cloth and ashes, of deprivation and sacrifice. One can work enough to ensure one’s basic creature comforts but dedicate the rest of one’s resources, energy, and aspirations

2. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/love/filmmore/pt.html>

3. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/jan/30/underground-arts-60s-rebel-counterculture>

to goods other than consuming more, and one can find more satisfaction in alternative pursuits to working long and hard to pay for consumption above and beyond what is needed for a comfortable life. The fact that millions have long persisted in capping their consumption and finding other sources of contentment suggests that such capping is much more sustainable than the ascetic life of the social movements and communities that sought to replace capitalism altogether.



Working fewer hours and hence consuming less can be viewed — at a relatively high level of income — as an opening for reexamining one’s lifestyle and the beginning of a quest for alternative sources of contentment

THE MAIN ALTERNATIVES

Consumerism has long been shown not to provide contentment (or happiness). The data, as most social science data, are complex. Not all the correlations yield the same results (Veenhoven and Hagerty 2006; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). However, overviews of the data have repeatedly concluded that after income rises above a given level, additional income buys little happiness. Japan is an often-cited example. Between 1962 and 1987, Japan’s economy more than tripled its GNP per capita. Yet Japan’s overall happiness remained constant over that period (Easterlin 2005). In 1970, Americans’ average income could buy over 60 percent more than it could in the 1940s, yet the average happiness had not increased (Easterlin 1973).

At high income and consumption levels, additional consumption (and the work required to afford it) leads people to deny themselves alternative pursuits. It seems a form of fixation. It has been referred to as a hedonic treadmill.

These data ought now to be reexamined, as many middle and working class people face not so much giving up additional income (and obsessive consumption) in order to free up time and resources for alternative pursuits — but they are forced to give up the dream of an affluent life based on high and rising levels of consumption. Can they come to see such capping not as a source of frustration but as an opportunity to reexamine their priorities? The analogue is to a worker who finds that he is furloughed one day each week and hence works only four days, but who finds that the extra day offers a welcome opportunity to spend more time with the kids or to go fishing — as opposed to someone who loses his job.




Jack van Wijk, *Tetrahedral*

NOT STATUS ACCEPTANCE

I must digress to stress that the thesis that people will be better off if they cap their consumption and dedicate the freed energy and resources to alternative pursuits should not be interpreted as suggesting that people should engage in what sociologists call status acceptance. Status acceptance is the argument that whatever your position in society is, you should accept it as your place in life and not seek upward mobility. Such precepts find their roots in the philosopher who dealt most explicitly with the subject at hand, what makes a good life, and gave us the felicitous term “flourishing” — Aristotle. He did not mean by it, as modern thought might, that people live up to their fullest human potential; but rather that people will find their basic contentment if they labor to carry out best whatever social role they find has been cast their way. The servant serves well, the lord leads well, and so on. (Aristotelian

philosophy is much more nuanced and complex than the preceding lines suggest, but this need not detain us here.) The Catholic Church made this precept one of its central tenants during the Middle Ages. And status acceptance is built into the Indian caste system.

The precept here advanced is that those whose basic needs are not well sated are indeed fully entitled to higher levels of consumption. Capping is called for only once these needs are satisfied. To highlight the point, it is useful to draw on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. At the bottom of this hierarchy are basic creature comforts; once these are sated, more satisfaction is drawn from affection, self-esteem, and beyond that, from self-actualization. When the acquisition of goods and services is used to satisfy the higher needs, consumption turns into consumerism — a social disease. The transition is empirically indicated by the level at which additional income generates little or no additional contentment. In short, the thesis outlined here is not a suggestion that unemployment or low wages are legitimate, but that working fewer hours and hence consuming less can be viewed — at relatively high level of income — as an opening for reexamining one's lifestyle and the beginning of a quest for alternative sources of contentment.



Capped consumption combined with greater involvement in one alternative pursuit or another (or a combination of several) leads to more contentment than consumerism. The challenge we face is to share these findings and their implications for those dragged into an age of austerity

THE ALTERNATIVES

The main alternative pursuits that generate much more contentment than consumerism are very familiar and hence visited next very briefly.

Social activities: Individuals who spend more time with their families, friends, in social clubs, and in communal activities — those who do not bowl alone — are more content than those less socially active. An analysis of nearly 150 studies found that individuals with stronger social relationships exhibited a 50-percent increased likelihood of survival (Hold-Lunstad, Smith and Bradley Layton 2010). Robert E. Lane (1993) writes, “Most studies agree that a satisfying family life is the most important contributor to well-being ... The joys of friendship often rank second.” Robert Putnam presents a mountain of data to the same effect.

Spiritual and religious activities: Individuals who spend more time living up to the commands of their religion (attending church, praying, fasting, making pilgrimages, and doing

charity work), studying for studying's sake rather than as a vocation, or engaged in cultural activities such as painting or making music, not to serve a market but for the intrinsic enjoyment, are more content than those less so engaged. For example, studies have demonstrated that people with a deep religious faith are healthier, live longer, and have lower rates of divorce, crime, and suicide (Bok 2010). To cite but one study, Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010) found that the difference in happiness between an American who goes to church once a week and someone who does not attend church was "slightly larger than the difference between someone who earns \$10 000 a year and his demographic twin who earns \$100 000 a year."

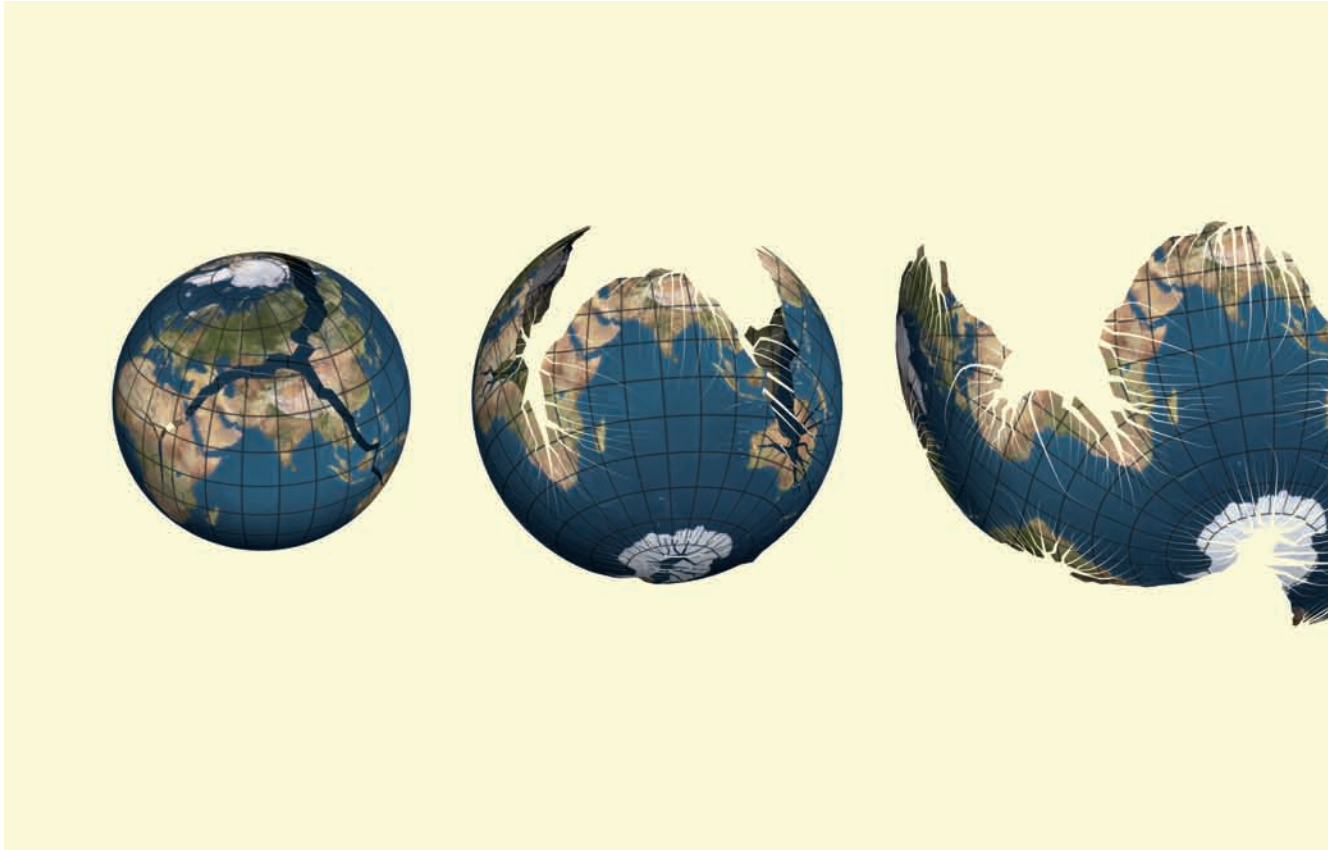
Community involvement: Researchers who examined the effect of community involvement found a strong correlation with happiness. One study, which evaluated survey data from 49 countries, found that membership in (non-church) organizations has a significant positive correlation with happiness (Helliwell 2003). Derek Bok (2010: 20) notes, "Some researchers have found that merely attending monthly club meetings or volunteering once a month is associated with a change in well-being equivalent to a doubling of income." Other studies have found that individuals who devote substantial amounts of time to volunteer work have greater life satisfaction (Ibid.: 22).

There is no need for more documentation here as these studies are familiar and readily accessible. They suggest that capped consumption combined with greater involvement in one alternative pursuit or another (or a combination of several) leads to more contentment than consumerism. The challenge we face is to share these findings and their implications for those dragged into an age of austerity.

TWO BONUSES

A society in which capping consumption is the norm and majorities find much of their contentment in transcendental pursuits will gain two bonuses of much import. One is obvious, and one much less so.

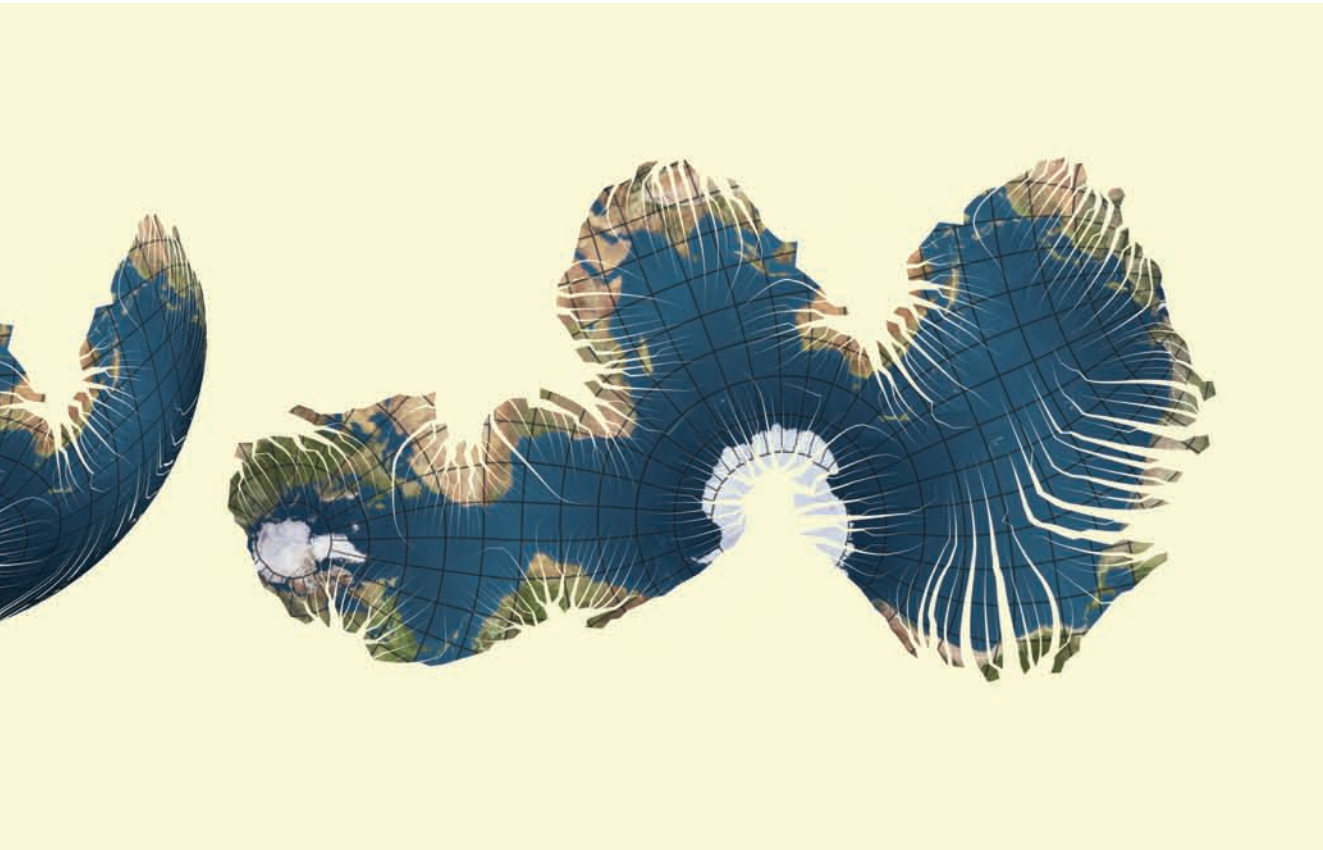
Obviously, a good life that combines a cap on consumption and work with dedication to transcendental pursuits is much less taxing on the environment than consumerism and the level of work that paying for it requires. This is the case because transcendental activities require relatively few scarce resources, fossil fuels, or other sources of physical energy. Social activities (such as spending more time with one's children) require time and personal energy but not large material or financial outlays. (Often those who spend large amounts of money on their kids' toys or entertainment bond less with them than those whose relations are much less mediated by objects.) The same holds for cultural and spiritual activities such as prayer,



Jack van Wijk, *Unfolding the Earth to the Coastline of the Earth*

meditation, enjoying and making music, art, sports, and adult education. True, consumerism has turned many of these pursuits into expensive endeavors. However, one can break out of this mentality and find that it is possible to engage in most transcendental activities quite profoundly using a moderate amount of goods and services. One does not need designer clothes to enjoy the sunset or shoes with fancy labels to benefit from a hike. Chess played with plastic pieces is the same game as the one played with carved mahogany or marble pieces. And the Lord does not listen better to prayers read from a leather-bound Bible than those read from a plain one, printed on recycled paper. In short, the transcendental society is much more sustainable than consumeristic capitalism.

Much less obvious are the ways the transcendental society serves social justice. Social justice entails transferring wealth from those disproportionately endowed to those who are underprivileged. A major reason such reallocation of wealth has been surprisingly limited in free societies is that those who command the “extra” assets tend also to be those who are



politically powerful. Promoting social justice by organizing those with less and forcing those in power to yield has had limited success in democratic countries and led to massive bloodshed in others. Hence the question: Are there ways to reduce the resistance of the elites to the reallocation of wealth?

Recharacterization of the good life along the lines here indicated helps, because it leads those with high income to derive a major source of contentment not from acquiring additional goods and services but from transcendental activities, activities that are neither labor- nor capital-intensive and, hence, do not require great amounts of assets. There are numerous accounts of rich people who have given substantial parts of their wealth to what they consider good causes. More generally, those who have strong religious beliefs (note that all major religions make giving to the poor a major commandment) and those who subscribe to social liberalism or democratic socialist ideals of social justice and opposition to inequality tend to share willingly with those less endowed. Hence, the more transcendental ideals are accepted,

the greater the number of affluent and powerful people who will have less reason to oppose reallocation of wealth, and the more who may even find some source of contentment in supporting it.

One can surely envision other characterizations of a good life. However, the dialogue about what such a society will look like and what its norms and projects can be should not be delayed. The world would benefit greatly: if it faced prolonged sluggish economic growth, this would not be viewed as frustrating and alienating but as an opportunity to reexamine life's priorities, and to determine whether we can make progress without attempting to deny that we all seek and are entitled to secure basic creature comforts. Such a recharacterization of the good life will not only spare the world major social and political upheavals and international conflicts, but it will also turn it into world in which all people can flourish.

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THE WORLD ECONOMY IS SLOWING DOWN, AND GOVERNMENTS ARE STRUGGLING TO FIND THE TOOLS TO RESTORE THEIR ECONOMIES TO THE LEVELS THEY ENJOYED IN THE PAST. INEQUALITY IS RISING SHARPLY IN MANY NATIONS, WHICH ARE WITNESSING INCREASED NATIONALISM, XENOPHOBIA, RACISM, RELIGIOUS FANATICISM, AND EXTREME POLITICS. WHAT IF IT IS SIMPLY NOT POSSIBLE TO RETURN TO THE “OLD NORMAL”, TO GO BACK TO LIFESTYLES DEPENDENT ON STRONGLY GROWING ECONOMIES? WHAT WILL THE “NEW NORMAL” LOOK LIKE? WILL WE MANAGE TO CREATE A NEW CONCEPT OF THE GOOD LIFE THAT WILL ALLOW PEOPLE TO TURN THEIR MISERY INTO OPPORTUNITY? THIS ESSAY TRACES CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE THROUGHOUT HISTORY, ENCOURAGING US TO RE-EXAMINE OUR PRIORITIES AND EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR CREATING FUTURE SOCIETIES WHEREIN ALL PEOPLE CAN FLOURISH.

BIOGRAPHY

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After receiving his PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 1958, Amitai Etzioni served as Professor of Sociology at Columbia University for 20 years. He was a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution in 1978 before serving as a Senior Advisor to the White House on domestic affairs from 1979 to 1980. In 1980, Etzioni was named the first University Professor at The George Washington University, where he is currently Director of the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies.

Etzioni is the author of 24 books, including *The Monochrome Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), *The Limits of Privacy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), and *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), which received the Simon Wiesenthal Center's

1997 Tolerance Book Award. His most recent books are *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), *From Empire to Community: A New Approach to International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and *Security First: For A Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 2007).

In 2001, Etzioni was awarded the John P. McGovern Award in Behavioral Sciences as well as the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. He has also received the Seventh James Wilbur Award for Extraordinary Contributions to the Appreciation and Advancement of Human Values by the Conference on Value Inquiry, as well as the Sociological Practice Association's Outstanding Contribution Award.