SMPLCTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art

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Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Artful Descent: A Cosmodicy of SMPLCTY

S M P L C T Y: Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art

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CONTENTS[*]

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‘Collapse now and avoid the rush.’

– **John Michael Greer**

Artful Descent: A Cosmodicy of SMPLCTY

Samuel Alexander

Are we, the creatures and creators of industrial civilisation, destined to face the same fate as people in previous civilisations, having risen to such great heights only to fall? Barely three centuries old, industrialisation has induced what some scientists and theorists are now calling 'the Anthropocene' – a geological blink-of-the-eye during which human impact on Earth has been so severe that it constitutes a new epoch. This is a time where biodiversity and wildlife populations are in catastrophic decline, and where carbon emissions are destabilising climate systems with tragic consequences that are already unfolding and promising to intensify. It challenges the imagination, I admit, to envision a time when our present civilisation is being studied as Rome is studied today, as an object of history – a dead civilisation. But is this the future we face? Or is there a door hidden in the wall through which we might be able to negotiate alternative pathways and escape what seems to be our impending fate? The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse may not wait long to let us answer. The dreadful clatter of hooves is already audible to those who have the courage to pay attention.

Contemporary discussion about 'sustainability transitions' seems to operate under the assumption that change itself is progress – or at least that a movement toward 'better' is good enough. But in order to transition in the *right direction*, what is needed is an accurate assessment of where we are, in its full and ghastly reality. As a guide to action, some understanding of where we would like to end up is also required, even if the destination seems distant, shifting, and perhaps unattainable. We should dare to imagine better worlds and more humane and nourishing social arrangements, provided these 'fictions' are used to inform action rather than induce passive escapism. Imagineers are easily dismissed as utopian dreamers or escapists who lack a sense of political reality. But just as vision without politics is naive, politics without vision is dangerous. We must dream before we shape our politics, or else we will never awaken from the existing nightmare of pragmatism without principle.

Aesthetic life as an alternative to collapse

Let me begin this essay by outlining the defining characteristics of the aesthetic form of life which I believe is a viable and desirable pathway beyond industrial civilisation. As I have noted before, this is neither a utopian statement nor a prediction. Rather, it is an *orienting vision* designed to guide prefigurative action in the here and now. I am employing the term SMPLCTY to refer to an idealised 'end state' of an ecological civilisation. In developing this vision, my two guiding premises have been, first, that material sufficiency is all that is *needed* for human beings to live rich, meaningful, and artful lives; and second, that material sufficiency is all that is *possible*, over the long term, on a finite planet in an age of environmental limits.

To live simply is to embrace an economics of sufficiency and moderation, finding harmony and balance in life by walking the middle way between too little and too much. This living strategy seeks to maximise opportunities for meaningful co-existence through artful and creative living, while minimising material and energy demands for reasons of justice, sustainability, and wellbeing. The archetypal member of this envisioned civilisation is someone I characterise as a poet-farmer (discussed further in the next essay). This is an aesthetic citizen who identifies as a creative and artistic being (broadly conceived to include not just artists but also artisans), and who embraces voluntary simplicity while contributing to material provision, community governance, and cultural richness.

By removing the 'i' from the conventional spelling of simplicity, the neologism SMPLCTY is intended to evoke a 'less is more' philosophy – or rather, a philosophy of 'just enough is plenty'. This defines the ethos of sufficiency underpinning my vision of ecological civilisation. The removal of the 'i' is also meant to imply the achievement of a diminished egoism (or increased communitarianism) compared to the possessive individualism that has come to define globalised industrial capitalism. This transcendence of crude individualism could also be understood as a deeper communion with the creative impulse or art-force underpinning our shared aesthetic reality.[1] Paradoxically, this diminished egoism, induced in part by 'losing oneself' in aesthetic experience, promises to increase opportunities for individual self-creation. As the Marxian dictum states: the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. As I conceive of it, the central goal of political theory is to determine which institutional arrangements and governance structures would allow this to happen to the greatest extent.

In what follows, SMPLCTY will be presented as the desirable outcome of a process of 'voluntary simplification' or 'artful descent'.[2] In the broadest terms, the goal of this ecological civilisation is to provide enough, for everyone, forever. I believe this is a necessary vision to embrace if humanity (as a whole) and affluent societies (in particular) are to move toward an equitable form of life that not only avoids ecosystemic collapse but also ensures the flourishing of all life on Earth within environmental limits. This creative process – what I have elsewhere called an 'aesthetics of degrowth'[3] – involves consciously transferring ever more time and attention to non-materialistic sources of meaning and happiness, both individually and socially. These practices would reflect a post-consumerist conception of the good life, where fulfillment in life is achieved through such things as self-directed creative labour, social and political engagement, enjoyment of nature, artistic activity, and aesthetic immersion and contemplation.

This vision is founded upon a conception of humanity which holds that our species, *homo aestheticus*, can live its fullest existence, and with infinite diversity, while living simply on modest material foundations.[4] Thus, with the support of appropriate social and political institutions,[5] and based on an ethic of enlightened self-interest, it will be recognised that moderation and even austerity in our material lives does not condemn us to hardship or deprivation. Instead, a way of life that is 'outwardly simple and inwardly rich'[6] illuminates the most direct path to sustainable wellbeing into the deep future, provided profound cultural changes are supplemented and supported by correlative structural changes in political economy. In ways I have explained throughout these essays, art, creative activity, and aesthetic

experience can do most of the heavy lifting in justifying existence as an aesthetic phenomenon.[7]

Through this shift in emphasis from the material (or external) dimensions of life to the spiritual (or internal) dimensions, the goal is to achieve maximum flourishing for the community of life, while minimising energy and resource demands in due respect of biophysical limits.[8] As psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm put it, this implies a shift from 'having' to 'being'[9] – an insight into the human condition which is ancient but ever new.[10] SMPLCTY is, by definition, an 'ideal' state that can never be fully or permanently achieved, due to the inherent tendency of civilisations to become more complex as new and unforeseen societal problems arise. But as outlined below, civilisations based on growth and ever deepening socio-technical complexification eventually grow themselves into a condition of deterioration and collapse.[11] Accordingly, I believe that voluntary simplification is the *only* means of avoiding this process of complexity-to-collapse – a process that has brought about the demise of all prior civilisations in history, and which is in the process of bringing down industrial civilisation.

My argument is that art and aesthetic experience are promising and available means of 'living more with less' – of flourishing in simplicity. Industrial civilisation has developed in ways where the human search for meaning is undertaken in ways that are often violent, unsustainable, unjust, and perhaps worst of all, largely unsuccessful. My thesis is that voluntary simplification presents a meaningful alternative to collapse, grounded in an aesthetics of existence. On that basis, opportunities for low-impact aesthetic practice and experience ought to be expanded as our material and energy demands contract for reasons of justice, sustainability, and wellbeing. I maintain that this is the door hidden in the wall, through which we have an opportunity, however slim, to escape the Four Horsemen.

Below I draw on the work of historian and anthropologist Joseph Tainter to understand the dynamics of complexification, before explaining why I believe, contra Tainter, voluntary simplification presents itself as the singular coherent response. By offering a sympathetic critique of Tainter's work, seemingly minor disagreements and refinements are shown to have major implications. I conclude the essay by offering a few more words on the nature of SMPLCTY as an orienting vision, including a brief re-examination of 'The Law of Progressive Simplification' as proposed by historian Arnold Toynbee in his *Study of History* (1934-61).

The collapse of complex societies

In his influential work, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1988), Joseph Tainter presented an original theory about the rise and demise of civilisations throughout history.[12] Tainter's theory is based on the observation that societies become more 'complex' as they solve the problems they face, and that such complexification necessitates increased energy use. For a society to sustain itself, therefore, it must secure the energy needed to solve the range of societal problems that emerge. Since problems continually arise, there is persistent pressure for growth in complexity, and thus growth in the energy supplies needed to support that complexity.

Both historically and today, such 'problems' might include securing enough food for a growing population, adjusting to demographic, climatic, or other environmental changes, dealing with aggression within or between states, organising society and developing institutions, managing public health, and so on. At a meta level, all societies must also solve, or try to solve, the first-order problem of life's meaning, even if this problem is usually confronted indirectly through the range of second-order challenges that life presents. Solving such societal problems, large or small, generally requires what Tainter calls 'complexification'. This might include creating new social roles, new social, political, or economic institutions, new technologies, new infrastructure, increasing production or information flows, etc. Indeed, the challenges any society might face are, for practical purposes, 'endless in number and infinite in variety',[13] and responding to societal problems generally requires energy and other resources. Tainter describes this development in human organisation and behaviour as a process of socio-political complexification.

The most original aspect of Tainter's theory is that he maintains that complexity has diminishing marginal returns. Given that we naturally solve the most important problems first, the early benefits of complexity offer significant benefits. Over time, however, Tainter argues that the benefits of complexity diminish in relation to the material, energetic, and social costs. (For example, the invention of the phone was a major leap forward in human communications, whereas the shift from iPhone 12 to iPhone 13 was much less significant). Upon these dynamics, there comes a point when societies may no longer be able to secure sufficient energy or other key resources to solve the range of problems faced. Accordingly, without corresponding advances in resource-use efficiency, such societies may be unable to maintain arrangements corresponding to their peaks of complexity.

Put more directly, large-scale societies can collapse (i.e., undergo rapid involuntary reduction in socio-political complexity) when the costs of sustaining their complexity become energetically unaffordable. In Tainter's words: 'A society or other institution can be destroyed by the cost of sustaining itself.'[14] As outlined below, this is the essential dynamic that Tainter argues 'can explain collapse as no other theory has been able to do.'[15] Not only is Tainter's theory of historical interest, it can offer insight into the evolving nature and dynamics of globalised industrial civilisation, today and in the future.[16]

Energy and civilisation

It is not necessary to resort to energy determinism or crude reductionism to insist on the fundamental role energy has played, and continues to play, in shaping the rise (and demise) of complex, large-scale societies.[17] Energy is not just another resource or commodity: it is the key that unlocks access to all other resources and commodities, thereby giving shape to the physical boundaries within which human societies must take form. In other words, a society's energetic foundations delimit the socio-economic forms that it may take. This is simply to concede that a particular form of society cannot emerge without sufficient energy supplies, in the appropriate forms, to support it. Furthermore, a society must be able to meet its *ongoing* energy demands if its specific socio-economic form is to persist. If it cannot, the society will transform or be transformed, voluntarily or otherwise.

To understand the dynamics of social complexity, it can be helpful to begin by focusing on prehistoric times, prior to the uptake of agriculture, when human life was about as 'simple' (in Tainter's sense) as can be. During these times, the main biophysical problem human beings faced was securing an adequate food supply, and this was solved, often relatively easily, by hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. Notably, anthropologists have concluded that prehistoric hunter-gatherers were the most leisured societies to have ever existed,[18] which confirms that food supply was generally secure and easily obtained. It seems that once essential biophysical needs were adequately met, hunter-gatherers stopped labouring and took rest or leisure rather than work longer hours to create a material surplus or more advanced technologies for which they did not seem to desire.[19]

This form of life was sustained by a minimal and largely static supply of energy – essentially just food, passive solar energy, and eventually fire. This tightly constrained energy supply placed strict bounds on the types of society that could arise, for the reason that more 'complex' social organisations and behaviours require greater supplies of energy. In other words, hunter-gatherer societies had no food surplus (i.e., energy surplus) to feed any non-food specialists – such as soldiers, bureaucrats, technologists, aristocrats, and so forth – so there was very little differentiation in social roles. Accordingly, for hundreds of thousands of years, early hunter-gatherer societies did not develop any significant degree of social complexity. (Note, an absence of social complexity in Tainter's sense does not imply any 'simplicity' or 'primitiveness' in cultural or spiritual depth.)

Human societies began to change, however, around 10,000 years ago as a consequence of the agricultural revolution. The greater productivity of agriculture for the first time gave human societies a significant boost in their food (i.e., energy) supply, and this set in motion the development of social complexity that continues to this day. Being so much more productive per acre than foraging, agriculture meant that not everyone had to spend their time securing food supply, and this gave rise to an array of non-food specialists, including those noted above and many more. Furthermore, the sedentary nature of agricultural societies made it practical to begin producing and accumulating new material artefacts (e.g., houses, furniture, collections of heavy tools and weapons, etc.), all of which would have been too cumbersome for nomadic peoples to justify creating, or too energy intensive.

Eventually wind energy (boats, windmills, etc.) and hydro energy (waterwheels) further enhanced humankind's energy surplus, paving the way for further increases in social complexity. The greatest energy revolution, however, was initiated early in the eighteenth century in Europe, when human beings first began harnessing on a large scale the extraordinary potential of fossil fuels. Over recent centuries, coal, gas, and oil have provided the vast energy foundations required to establish and maintain a form of life as complex as globalised industrial civilisation. While it is believed that hunter-gatherers had no more than a dozen distinct social personalities, modern European censuses recognise as many as 20,000 unique occupational roles, and industrial societies may contain more than 1,000,000 different kinds of social personalities.[20] If nothing else, this is evidence of unprecedented social complexity.

At this stage it is important to note that social complexity does not always follow an energy surplus, but often precedes a surplus. In fact, Tainter argues that complexity *typically* precedes an energy surplus. While he accepts that historically there were a few isolated 'revolutions' in energy supply that certainly made further complexity possible, he argues that normally complexity arises when new problems present themselves. In solving those problems, societies are forced to find a way to produce more energy, if that is possible. This contrasts with the isolated situations (following an energy revolution) when societies voluntarily become more complex due to an availability of surplus energy. As Tainter puts it, 'Complexity often compels the production of energy, rather than following its abundance.'[21] This is significant because it means that increasing complexity often is not voluntary, in that it is typically a response to the emergence of unwanted problems, rather than being a creative luxury chosen in response to the availability of surplus energy. This is a point to which I will return as the case for and against voluntary simplification is assessed.

Energy descent futures

Below I outline the role of energy in large-scale societies through the lens of Tainter's theory of socio-political complexification and collapse, focusing on what *energy descent futures* could mean for the current growth-orientated and globalised industrial civilisation. The prospect of energy descent – defended elsewhere[22] – is based on a view that post-carbon sources of energy (e.g., wind turbines and solar panels) will be unable to fully replace the magnitude and nature of energy services currently supported by fossil fuels. As fossil fuel availability declines – either voluntarily due to climate change mitigation or involuntary due to increasing resource scarcity – humanity will find itself with declining energy supply. This is certainly not an argument against renewable energy. It is an argument that the necessary and desirable transition to 100% renewable energy implies having less energy than is available in affluent, carbon-based societies today. The requirement to embrace energy descent in high energy societies is especially compelling in time frames relevant to meeting shrinking carbon budgets (requiring swift and deep decarbonisation) and if distributive equity is taken into account.

Given the close connection between energy and economic activity,[23] the existing form of (industrial) civilisation will be unsupportable in an energy descent future. Furthermore, maintaining current energy supply while facing rising societal costs (e.g., climate breakdown) functions similarly to energy descent. This is because solving new problems draws scarce energy away from what would otherwise have been invested in solving old problems (such as maintaining existing societal institutions and infrastructure). Deterioration or collapse of civilisation follows. Our choice is either to try to maintain this industrial-growthist form of civilisation – which is impossible because it is unsustainable – or build a new form of civilisation. The former is the dominant position today, advocated by governments, businesses, and cultures with consumerist aspirations; the latter is the pathway I will be recommending.

Complexification of society involves a balancing of costs and benefits. That is, when a society solves a problem by becoming more complex it will receive the benefits of solving the problem, but it will also incur the costs of doing so. These costs will include, most importantly, energy and resources, but also costs like time, labour, and annoyance. This balancing exercise takes

place every time a society considers responding to a problem by creating a new institution, adding new bureaucrats, developing some new technology, or establishing new social or physical infrastructures, etc. Societies pursue complexity – that is, develop new practices or technologies that attempt to solve the problems they face – when it seems that the benefits of doing so will outweigh the costs. Critically, there must also be the energy and resources available to actually subsidise the problem-solving activity, or at least the potential to acquire more energy and resources, if current supplies are already exhausted in simply maintaining existing complexity.

As noted above, Tainter's central thesis is that while increasing social complexity initially provides a significant net benefit to a society, eventually the benefits derived from complexity diminish and the relative costs begin to increase. He explains that the diminishing returns on complexity arise from the fact that 'humans always tend to pick the lowest hanging fruit first, going on to higher branches only when those lower no longer hold fruit. In problem-solving systems, inexpensive solutions are adopted before more complex and expensive ones.'[24] Over time, the energy and resource costs of problem-solving tend to increase and the relative benefits decrease, which is another way of saying that the marginal return on complexity starts to decline.

Eventually, Tainter argues, the costs of solving a problem will actually be higher than the benefits gained. At this point further problems will not or cannot be solved – or only at the expense of not solving other problems – and societies become vulnerable to deterioration or even rapid collapse. Another way of expressing this is to say that there comes a point in the evolution of societies when all the energy available to that society is exhausted by simply maintaining the existing level of complexity. When further problems arise, as history tells us they inevitably will do, the lack of an energy surplus means that new problems cannot be solved and thus societies become liable to collapse.

This highlights the point explained above about how complexity is not always, and not even normally, a voluntary response to surplus energy, but instead is usually required for a society to sustain itself as new problems emerge. Societies can be destroyed, however, when the costs of sustaining their complexity become unaffordable in terms of resources in general and energy resources especially. This is the essential dynamic that Tainter argues 'can explain collapse as no other theory has been able to do.'[25]

Implications on sustainability discourse

One of the most challenging aspects of Tainter's theory is how it reframes – even revolutionises – how we understand sustainability. Tainter argues that sustainability is about problem solving and that problem solving increases social complexity. However, he also argues that social complexity requires energy and resources, and this implies that solving problems, including ecological problems, can actually require *increases* in energy and resource consumption, not reductions. He explains his position by presenting a critique of voluntary simplification:

> *Voluntarily reduce resource consumption*. This strategy is constrained by the fact that societies increase in complexity to solve problems. Resource production must grow to fund the increased complexity. To implement voluntary conservation long term would require that a society be either uniquely lucky in not encountering problems, or that it not address the problems that confront it.[26]

Indeed, Tainter maintains that sustainability is 'not a passive consequence of having fewer human beings who consume more limited resources',[27] as many argue it is. In fact, he suggests that voluntary simplification – that is, the pursuit of forms of social organisation that remain viable with reduced resource use – may no longer be an option for industrial civilisation. Instead, Tainter's primary conception of sustainability involves subsidising ever-increasing complexity with more energy and resources in order to solve ongoing problems.[28] I say 'primary conception' because there are subtleties in Tainter's position that leave open theoretical space (explored below) for alternative conclusions and pathways.

In order to defend SMPLCTY as a viable and desirable form of life, I need to critically examine Tainter's contention that voluntary simplification is not a viable path to sustainability. Given the plausibility of future energy descent, I argue that voluntary simplification is by far the best strategy to implement, even if this conflicts directly with the dominant strategies today which focus on promoting economic growth, material affluence, and advanced technological solutions. Part of the theoretical tension between my position and Tainter's critique of voluntary simplification turns on differing notions of 'sustainability'. Whereas in Tainter's sense sustainability infers *sustaining existing forms of socio-political organisation*, I extend this to *changing the forms of organisation* through voluntary simplification, insofar as that is required for humanity to operate within the carrying capacity of the planet.

Furthermore, even if attempting to sustain existing forms of organising through ever-increasing complexity continues to be humanity's dominant approach to solving societal problems, I maintain the alternative path of voluntary simplification remains the most effective means of building 'resilience' (i.e., the ability of an individual or community to withstand societal or ecological shocks). Such an approach could even lay the foundations for societies to develop the 'antifragile' characteristic of living systems that *strengthen* in response to stress. This is significant because it justifies the practice and promotion of voluntary simplification, irrespective of the likelihood of it ever being broadly accepted. That is, if industrial civilisation's increasing socio-political complexity is coming to an end one way or another due to energy descent, then it would be better to accept this energetic trajectory and prepare for it, rather than wait for it to arrive through crisis and collapse. The aim is not to achieve some passive socio-ecological stasis, but to move toward a way of life that achieves some form of dynamic equilibrium within ecologically sustainable limits.

While I accept that problem solving generally implies an increase in social complexity of the nature Tainter describes, the position I present below is that there comes a point when such complexity itself becomes a problem, at which point voluntary simplification, not further complexity, is the most appropriate response.[29] Not only does industrial civilisation seem to be at such a point today, or well beyond it, I hope to show, albeit in a preliminary way, that voluntary simplification presents a viable and desirable option for responding to today's

converging social, economic and ecological problems. This goes against Tainter's primary conception of sustainability, while accepting much of his background theoretical framework.

Given that Tainter seems to accept, as we will see, that his own conception of sustainability will eventually lead to collapse, I believe he is wrong to be so dismissive of voluntary simplification as a strategy for potentially avoiding collapse. It is, I argue, our only alternative to collapse, and if that is so, voluntary simplification ought to be given our most rigorous attention and commitment, even if the chances of success do not seem high. Tainter seems flippant about our best hope, and given what is at stake, his dismissal of voluntary simplification should be given close critical attention.

Tainter's critique of voluntary simplification

Tainter maintains that the argument for sustainability based on voluntarily consuming less and reducing social complexity follows logically from what he considers a flawed assumption – the assumption that surplus resources and energy *precede* and *facilitate* innovations that increase complexity. 'Complexity, in this view, is a voluntary matter. Human societies became more complex by choice rather than necessity. By this reasoning, we should be able to choose to forgo complexity and the resource consumption that it entails.'[30] Tainter rejects that reasoning. In his view, complexity is generally forced upon societies as they respond to new problems, not voluntarily embraced due to an energy surplus, and this leads Tainter to reject voluntary simplification as a path to sustainability:

> Contrary to what is typically advocated as the route to sustainability, *it is usually not possible for a society to reduce its consumption of resources voluntarily over the long term*. To the contrary, as problems great and small inevitably arise, addressing these problems requires complexity and resource consumption to increase.[31]

Elsewhere, Tainter arrives at the same conclusion: 'Sustainability is an active condition of problem solving, not a passive consequence of consuming less.'[32] More directly still, he insists that 'sustainability may require greater consumption of resources rather than less. One must be able to afford sustainability.'[33] He concludes an essay with the following statement, epitomising his environmental stance: 'Developing new energy is therefore the most fundamental thing we can do to become sustainable.'[34]

His essential argument, therefore, is that if we have enough energy to solve the problems we face, civilisation will not deteriorate or collapse. The flip side of that argument, of course, is that if we cannot secure the necessary energy, our future looks much bleaker. That is, we will be destined to repeat the growth cycle of all previous civilisations that have developed and collapsed according to the same logic of diminishing returns on complexity. According to Tainter, the tendency of all societies to become more complex over time, coupled with the diminishing marginal returns on complexity, means that eventually all societies get locked into a process of mandatory growth in complexity that eventually becomes unsupportable. This theory of social complexity implies that all societies have an inbuilt tendency to collapse.

Despite Tainter's approach to sustainability being coherently and rigorously argued (if one accepts his assumptions), his position directly contradicts those who advocate reducing overall

energy and resource consumption, which is the strategy I am defending. For reasons already outlined, Tainter rejects that strategy as flawed in theory, and naïve in practice, perhaps even impossible. Given that Tainter is equally dismissive of the other approaches to sustainability (e.g., population reduction, internalising externalities, technological advancements, etc.), one can understand why he resigns himself to the fact that 'the study of social complexity does not yield optimistic results.'[35]

There is something deeply tragic about Tainter's view, because it suggests that civilisation, by its very nature, gets locked into a process of mandatory growth in complexity that eventually becomes unsupportable. Furthermore, history provides a disturbingly consistent empirical basis for this tragic view,[36] leading Tainter to conclude that 'all solutions to the problem of complexity are temporary.'[37] This seemingly innocuous statement is actually profoundly dark, for it implies that ultimately and inevitably social complexity will outgrow its available energy supply. Despite this situation, or rather, because of it, Tainter argues that '"success" consists substantially of staying in the game,'[38] and he believes that sustainability in this sense depends on developing new energy sources to subsidise ongoing problem-solving activity.

Voluntary simplification as an alternative to collapse

I have explained why Tainter believes voluntary simplification is not a readily available civilisational pathway for sustainability. He asserts that such a strategy would 'require that a society be either uniquely lucky in not encountering problems, or that it not address the problems that confront it.'[39] I hope to show, however, that on this critical point he is in error. Furthermore, I will argue that given the tendency of societies to become more complex than they can afford to be, sustainability – in the sense of being sustained into the deep future – requires that societies embrace voluntary simplification when the costs of complexity exceed the benefits. If they do not, they collapse.

Another way of expressing this argument is to say that as the benefits of social complexity diminish and become outweighed by the costs, the benefits of voluntary simplification increase. To be clear, I do not argue that voluntary simplification is *likely* to be embraced as a response to existing crises; my argument is that it is the *only* alternative to collapse, and thus it is a strategy we should do our very best to adopt, no matter our prospects of success. Indeed, given the devastating consequences of any collapse scenario, voluntary simplification becomes a moral imperative.

Building upon the analysis so far, voluntary simplification can be defined more precisely as *choosing a form of life in which the overall consumption of energy and resources is progressively reduced and eventually stabilised at a level that is sufficient for a good life and which lies within the planet's sustainable carrying capacity*. Furthermore, *because social complexity requires energy and resources, voluntarily reducing energy and resource consumption would generally imply a reduction in social complexity*. This definition of voluntary simplification raises many questions, which I will now endeavour to answer.

Most importantly, the definition must be situated in the context of Tainter's theory of social complexity, for in that context the notion of voluntarily reducing energy and resources seems

like an incoherent strategy to achieve sustainability. This demands an immediate explanation, because if one were to accept that solving problems generally requires energy and resources – and I do accept that – it would seem to follow that voluntary simplification means *choosing to solve fewer problems*. I will now try to explain that the apparent incoherency here disappears when we take a closer look at what Tainter means when he uses the term 'problem', which is a central concept in his theory. It seems that Tainter oversimplifies here what is a complex term, and that misunderstanding or misuse locks him into the tragic worldview outlined above. I believe that clearing up this misunderstanding provides the key to escaping Tainter's tragic worldview.

We have seen that societies increase their social complexity when they solve the problems with which they are presented. However, Tainter employs the term 'problem' as if it were self-defining and unambiguous. He assumes that a society just knows what is and what is not a problem, which of course is not an unreasonable assumption. On closer inspection, however, a 'problem' in Tainter's sense is actually a radically indeterminate notion, requiring various value judgements in order to give it content. There are at least three causes of this indeterminacy.

First, indeterminacy can arise over the very question of what constitutes a problem. For example, if a nation perceives a problem of national security, it may wage war on a threateningly powerful neighbouring state, rather than risk being attacked by surprise. Solving the 'problem' of security, therefore, might require (a) creating an army; and (b) if the war were successful, defending a larger territory, perhaps requiring a larger army. This solution to the problem of security is a classic example of how increasing social complexity can require increased energy and resources.

However, the 'problem' here is by no means something independent of human values or perspectives. That is, the problem is not just imposed on the society for it to deal with as best it can. There are *choices* involved about what problems to focus on. For example, rather than seeing the problem as being one of 'security', a different society might have seen a problem of 'economic growth', and rather than waging war, this alternative society might have tried to solve its problem by seeing if it could create a relationship of mutual benefit with its neighbours, perhaps through trade. Even through this simple example (which could be endlessly multiplied) it can be seen that the 'problems' that exist for any given society are often a value-laden function of their perspective or goals, not objective or externally imposed challenges that arise independently.

A second cause of indeterminacy lies in the fact that there is rarely only one means of *solving* a particular problem. In the example above, the problem of security could have been solved by waging war, building a defensive wall, trying to negotiate a treaty, some mixture of these strategies, or through some other strategy entirely. Likewise, the problem of 'economic growth' could have been solved by creating new trade relationships, developing new technologies, marketing goods more effectively, or perhaps realising that growth was not actually so important (or was even harmful). Just as different worldviews might produce or dissolve certain problems, different worldviews also provide different ways of dealing with the problems that do exist (or are perceived to exist). Significantly, this means that shifts in

perspective, values, or desires can affect the level of energy or resources that are needed to deal with societal problems.

Finally, indeterminacy can also arise over the question of 'whose' problems have to be solved, for society is not a harmonious entity with a single set of goals and desires. This raises distributive questions of real importance. All societies have a limited pool of energy and resources, and the nature of any society is shaped significantly by how those limited resources are distributed and to what ends those resources are directed. Accordingly, when a society invests energy and resources to solve certain 'problems', we are entitled to ask questions about whose interests are being served by addressing those particular issues as opposed to others. It may be, after all, that some people in a society do not see such and such a problem as being a legitimate concern, or perhaps they see other issues that are not being addressed as being more urgent.

Tainter, it should be noted, is not wholly unaware of this issue. He writes: 'In a hierarchical institution [or society], the benefits of complexity often accrue at the top, while the costs are paid primarily by those at the bottom.'[40] But he does not seem to appreciate that this is evidence of indeterminacy over what constitutes a problem; nor does he seem to appreciate how all these causes of indeterminacy impact on his theory. Even in a context of energy descent, for example, it could be that many civilisational problems (including environmental problems) could be solved if existing concentrations of wealth were redistributed toward solving those problems, rather than merely satisfying the indulgences of a small global elite. Less positively, in circumstances of civilisation deterioration or collapse, the most likely outcome of socio-economic stress is that poverty is forced on the poorest social classes while the elite continue to reap the benefits of the complexity that remains.

My point in exposing these three indeterminacies is to show that societal problems are not objective phenomena that exist independently of humankind and which we must simply deal with the best we can. Rather, problems are often the product of a particular worldview or value-system, in the sense that they only exist as problems because society (or a particular subset of society) desires a certain state of affairs. This analysis could be applied to all aspects of industrial civilisation, including: the way energy is produced and used; the way we transport ourselves; the way we organise ourselves and our economies; the way we attend to our health or educational needs; the way we house and clothe ourselves; the way we entertain ourselves; and so on. Rather than solving the problem of water security by creating expensive and energy intensive desalination plants, for example, people could simply use less water; rather than addressing obesity with expensive diet pills or liposuction, people could choose to eat better and do more exercise; rather than buying a clothes dryer, people could dry their clothes on a string outside.

This is not always the case, of course. Some very serious problems – climate change, for example – will obviously not disappear merely because human beings decide to think differently about the world. But many perceived problems and perceived solutions are in fact dependent on the way human beings view the world, or dependent on whose particular perspective is adopted. What this means is that if the world came to be looked at through a different lens of understanding, a society might well find that it was faced with different

problems, and perhaps different solutions would present themselves to existing problems. Again, this is significant because it means that changing perspectives or values can affect the level of energy or resources that are needed for a society to deal with its problems.

The implications of this analysis are profound. Most importantly, it opens up space within Tainter's theory for voluntary reductions in energy and resources. The key point is this: *the energy intensity of industrial civilisation is primarily a function of the values that produce or shape the perception of its problems*. Those values also produce and shape the perception of what constitutes a solution to perceived problems. Change those values, however, and many of the energy intensive problems that industrial civilisation currently feels the need to solve may well disappear. Although in places Tainter seems to acknowledge this,[41] he does not appear to grasp its implications for his own conception of sustainability. If energy intensive problems can be solved or rather dissolved by changing one's values or perspective, this will reduce the overall energy requirements for 'problem solving', thus creating an option for voluntary simplification.

When this is understood, the apparent incoherency of voluntary simplification disappears (i.e., the perceived implication that it would require choosing 'to solve fewer problems'). Simplification might instead involve solving different problems, or perhaps solving the same problems in different, less energy-intensive ways. Tainter does not seem to appreciate this, or at least its significance, for otherwise he would not dismiss simplification so readily. He argues that voluntarily reducing consumption would require that a society be either uniquely lucky in not encountering problems, or that it not address the problems that confront it.[42] But the analysis above shows that there is a third option: rethinking both what constitutes a problem and what constitutes an appropriate response. It may be that many problems that industrial civilisation currently invests in are not actually problems that need to be solved, or not in such energy intensive ways. For example, we could 'solve' the 'problem' of transport with more bikes and fewer cars, suggesting that sustainability is not always about *maintaining* a certain way of life but actually *changing* it, perhaps in fundamental ways.

The critical point is that this type of analysis could be reproduced through essentially limitless examples. There is always room for a society to rethink its problems, rethink its solutions, and, importantly, *rethink how it prioritises the energy and resources it has available for problem solving*. If a society does this effectively it may find that it can solve all of its most important problems while reducing its consumption of energy and resources within sustainable levels (and redistributing its energy and resources when responding to new problems that arise). Doing so, of course, may produce a very different type of society.

How might Tainter respond?

One way Tainter might respond to this analysis is to argue that it seems to ignore the tendency of all societies to increase in complexity. Even if Tainter accepted, as he might well do, that there is room to reduce the energy intensity of industrial civilisation in the short term, he might nevertheless reiterate that societies are constantly faced with new problems, such that any attempts at voluntary simplification will eventually be rendered unsuccessful by the inexorable pressure to increase social complexity in response to new problems. For that

reason, the costs of maintaining society will still tend to increase over the long term. Tainter might insist, therefore, that my analysis has not been able to provide any escape from the inherent tendency of civilisations to grow in social complexity until they cannot afford the costs of their own existence.

While I accept that societies will constantly be faced with new problems and that solving them will tend to increase social complexity, this is not fatal to the position I am defending. It would only be problematic if it were assumed that voluntary simplification is a passive or static form of life, as opposed to one that is dynamic and evolving. But I maintain that achieving sustainability, far from being passive or static in any way, must be a strategy that is self-reflective and constantly in flux. Again, if in places Tainter might seem to accept this point, he does not seem to appreciate what it means for his dismissal of voluntary simplification. The thought processes, behaviours, and institutions which voluntary simplification might represent cannot be static or unchanging, but must constantly respond to new circumstances and opportunities in novel ways.

Granted, if voluntary simplification meant reducing consumption and then returning to old ways of living, one can understand why social complexity would tend to increase over time, negating any initial benefits of voluntary simplification. But voluntary simplification allows for a more nuanced definition. It can and should be considered an ongoing process, in which people and societies continually seek to reduce and restrain consumption, while also rethinking how best to invest the energy and resources at their disposal. Accordingly, there is no reason to think that a society cannot be sustained, over the long term, on an environmentally sustainable level of energy and resource consumption, while still solving its most important problems (including new problems). Voluntary simplification, therefore, is not about achieving a stasis; it is about actively working on reaching and then maintaining some form of dynamic equilibrium within sustainable limits. This will not be easy, of course; but it is not impossible. And it may be the only escape from the Four Horsemen.

A second way Tainter might respond to my analysis is to say that there is already room for it within his own theory.[43] Although this would require a degree of self-contradiction, the response would seem to have some initial justification. After all, in his historical analysis, Tainter states that the Byzantine Empire (which survived the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century) is an example, albeit the only one he claims, where 'a large, complex society systematically simplified, and reduced thereby its consumption of resources.'[44] At first instance, this seems to be the strategy I am defending. But after acknowledging Byzantine simplification, Tainter immediately adds that '[w]hile this case shows that societies can reduce consumption and thrive, it offers no hope that this can be commonly done.'[45] More importantly, however, Tainter points out that simplification in the Byzantine Empire was both forced – that is, made necessary by a gross insufficiency of resources – and temporary.[46] Since I am defending a strategy of simplification that is both voluntary and practiced over the long term, the Byzantine example is not evidence that voluntary simplification already fits within Tainter's theory. Rather, establishing the viability of voluntary simplification extends Tainter's theory in a way that avoids his tragic conclusions.[47]

A third way Tainter might respond to my analysis is by stating that, even if simplification were an available strategy, it will not be voluntarily embraced on the grounds that people will perceive that it is against their own interests. In fact, when considering whether voluntary simplification is possible, he states: 'I am confident that usually it is not, that humans will not ordinarily forgo affordable consumption of things they desire on the basis of abstract projections about the future.'[48] Although Tainter's position here has some intuitive force, it is far from being self-evident. Tainter seems to assume (without being explicit about it) that reducing consumption is against one's self-interest.

But that assumption, despite being culturally entrenched, is empirically debatable, and in consumer societies it is most probably false. Indeed, there is now a vast body of social and psychological research indicating that many if not most Western-style consumers are actually mis-consuming to some extent, in the sense that they could increase their wellbeing while reducing their consumption.[49] The intricacies of that research cannot be explored here, but if it can indeed be shown, as I believe it can, that large portions of high consumption societies would benefit from exchanging superfluous material consumption for more time to pursue non-materialist forms of wellbeing, this would provide further support for the argument that voluntary simplification is not only possible, but desirable. If more people came to see this, one would expect simplification to be voluntarily embraced, not out of altruism but through self-interest.

Nevertheless, while that might be so at the individual or community level, the question of whether *governments* will ever voluntarily initiate overall reductions in societal production and consumption is more challenging. After all, governments depend for their existence on taxes, and a larger economy means more taxable income, so a process of voluntary simplification is almost certainly not going to be initiated from the 'top down'. The overriding objective of governments around the world is to expand their economies without apparent limit, and continued growth requires (among other things) a citizenry that seeks ever-higher material standards of living. This growth model of progress is arguably a reflection of an underlying belief that social progress requires more energy and resources in order to increase existing standards of living and solve ongoing problems. But if the global economy has now reached a stage where the growth model is causing the very problems it was supposed to solve, as many argue it has, then voluntary simplification provides the most coherent path forward, especially for the most highly developed regions of the world.

Although the prospects of governments embracing some 'top down' policy of voluntary simplification seem very slim, it is also clear that governments create many of the structures within which social movements operate, and those structures can function either to facilitate or inhibit a process of voluntary simplification. While an examination of ways governments could facilitate such a process lies beyond the scope of this essay, the 'growth imperative' structurally built into modern economies suggests that if voluntary simplification is to emerge, it may well have to be driven 'from below'.[50]

Voluntary simplification, as I have defined it, involves rethinking problems, exploring new solutions, and reassessing how the limited energy and resources available for problem solving are prioritised. This is where the practical implications of the analysis become clearest. The

task is to evaluate, personally and socially, how and where energy and resources are used and for what purposes; to isolate those areas where those resources are being wasted or misdirected; to redirect or redistribute those resources toward solving the most pressing social and ecological problems; and, where possible, reducing the overall energy-intensity of our ways of living even if this involves reductions in social complexity. If a household, community, or society does this effectively it may find that it can solve all its most important problems, including new ones, while reducing its consumption of energy and resources (or at least not getting locked into ever-increasing consumption and complexity). But this process is not about achieving some passive ecological, social, or economic stasis; it is about constantly working on reaching and then maintaining some form of dynamic equilibrium within ecologically sustainable limits. Given that presently the global economy is far exceeding the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, it follows that voluntary simplification implies creating very different social and economic systems.

As I have argued elsewhere,[51] an ecologically sustainable society would probably need to be based on a highly self-sufficient, low-carbon economy that uses mostly local resources to meet local needs. These would be zero-growth economies that were sustained on ecologically viable levels of resource consumption and environmental impact. This implies that material living standards would be far lower than what are common in consumer societies today, but basic needs for all could be met and high quality of life could be maintained through non-materialistic sources of meaning and happiness. Embracing lifestyles of voluntary simplicity, therefore, does not necessarily mean hardship or deprivation. Rather, it means focusing on what is *sufficient* to live well, rather than constantly seeking increased consumption and greater affluence.

Should industrial civilisation continue to pursue the path of growth without limits, in an attempt to universalise affluence, it will meet the fate of all previous civilisations, with all the suffering that implies. To avoid this, what is required is voluntary simplification. If voluntary simplification is not embraced on a sufficiently wide scale to avoid social, economic, or ecological collapse, it nevertheless remains the most effective way for individuals and communities to build resilience. It would free up more energy and resources to deal with systemic disruptions. In the current milieu, therefore, perhaps the ability to withstand forthcoming shocks is the best we can hope for.

The 'Law of Progressive Simplification'

Industrial civilisation is at a point in history when it is faced with the pressing issue of whether it can afford the problem of its own existence. Like a growing number of others, I do not believe that it can, at least, not for much longer. Ongoing environmental and financial crises around the world are barely disguised metaphors for this question of affordability, and they present all of us living in industrial civilisation with the question of how best to respond to this problem – the problem of whether civilisation can afford the costs of its own complexity.

We are hardly the first to be faced with this problem; indeed, all previous civilisations have faced it. But perhaps we can be first, thanks to Joseph Tainter, to understand the dynamics at play. Perhaps we can even respond in such a way as to avoid the collapse scenario that has

marked the end of all other civilisations. Prior civilisations attempted to sustain themselves and avoid collapse by continuing to increase complexity in response to new problems, but always this strategy has resulted in collapse, because eventually the energy and resources needed to subsidise increased complexity becomes unavailable. Nevertheless, this seems to be the very response industrial civilisation is taking presently, and indeed it is the one which Tainter himself recommends as the best course of action. As he puts it, 'modern societies will continue to need high-quality energy, and securing this should be the first priority of every nation with a research capability.'[52]

As I have argued, this advice from Tainter is deeply problematic, given that energy-intensive problem solving led to collapse on all other occasions in history, of which he is very aware. The advice appears more problematic still if one accepts that the world is facing a future of 'energy descent'. But Tainter's advice follows the logic of his own assumptions. While I accept that complexity generally has diminishing marginal returns, I have tried to show, albeit in a preliminary way, that voluntary simplification is actually a viable and desirable response to this challenging dynamic. In doing so, I have turned Tainter's solution on its head: where he sees the solution to civilisation's problems in further complexity, I maintain the best and probably the only solution lies in voluntary simplification.

This position is not without esteemed support. The great historian of civilisations Arnold Toynbee described the 'Law of Progressive Simplification' as a process of 'etherealization',[53] whereby humanity learns to meet its deepest existential needs with declining material and energy demands. He explained that the result is 'not a loss but a gain; and this gain is the outcome of process of simplification because the process liberates forces that have been imprisoned in a more material medium and thereby sets them free to work in a more ethereal medium with greater potency.'[54] He added that this involves 'not merely a simplification of apparatus but a consequent transfer of energy, or shift of emphasis, from some lower sphere of being or of action to a higher.'[55]

Toynbee explained this process primarily in terms of efficiency improvements via 'technical progress'[56] and the 'human control over physical nature.'[57] In my view, progressive (or voluntary) simplification ought to *include* such dematerialisation or deintensification via technological innovation, but refers more fundamentally to a socio-ethical or even spiritual approach to life that is independent of the state of technology. In other words, progressive simplification can be undertaken immediately, with or without further technological advance, and indeed, with or without biophysical pressures. We can even conceive of civilisations that embrace simplicity in advance of necessity. That is, by resisting over-complexification as a means of *avoiding* problems, as opposed to over-complex civilisations (such as present-day industrial civilisation) that are pressured to simplify in order to *resolve* their problems.

If humanity does not learn to embrace voluntary simplification within the present iteration of (industrial) civilisation, the minimally optimistic hypothesis I posit is that humanity will *eventually* come to see that it is the only path to genuine sustainability and flourishing within biophysical limits. Of course, given the profound seductions of complexity, the insecurities of the human ego, the grasping for power, and the limitations of the human intellect, it is possible and indeed likely that this lesson may not be learned until many more civilisations rise and

fall as a result of the diminishing returns on complexity. Indeed, it is possible that humanity never learns this lesson.

However, the faith implicit to my vision of SMPLCTY is that *eventually* humanity will learn that voluntary simplification is the only path to civilisational stability and flourishing. Just as humanity (so far) has managed to avoid nuclear Armageddon for fear of mutually assured destruction, so too might our species one day learn that voluntary simplification is required for the same reason. As cultures develop this deep historical consciousness – when they see more clearly the repeated patterns of collapse occurring over and over again – I believe our species will slowly absorb this wisdom, in a piecemeal fashion, over an indeterminate timescale. This may take centuries or even millennia, but over time the ranks who come to see this truth will expand, eventually leading to the deep transformation of human society. One way or another, there will be a Great Simplification, whether by design or disaster. Thus, as John Michael Greer declares, let's 'collapse now and avoid the rush.'[58]

As opposed to a utopian fantasy or prediction, I have suggested that SMPLCTY ought to be received as an *orienting vision* that should increasingly guide human endeavour as it becomes clearer to more people that growth-orientated alternatives will always end in collapse. It designates a civilisation in dynamic equilibrium, constantly balancing and rebalancing its societal goals in relation to its sustainable (and therefore limited) flow of energy and resources. The turn to non-materialistic sources of meaning and happiness does not imply a turn away from nature, sensuous experience, or the material world, it only implies negation of practices that are unnecessarily materially and energetically consumptive (i.e., unsustainable). The questions of how much is enough, of what, and for whom, are the defining value-laden inquiries that inform the ethics and politics of SMPLCTY.

According to this view, human beings would be justified in being messengers, advocates for, and prefigurative pioneers of voluntary simplification, even if our success or validation likely lies beyond this civilisational cycle. If the cause is known to be good, then we can take solace in the fact that we are serving a noble cause bigger than ourselves – not other-worldly but of this Earth – even if many of the rewards will only accrue to future generations. But as the Greek proverb goes: 'a civilisation flourishes when people plant trees under which they will never sit.' When struggles are of profound existential import, patience can be a necessary virtue, and there is honour in being an underlabourer whose modest but necessary contribution will one day be forgotten.

As I have noted, practising simplicity in the here and now also has the fortunate consequence of building resilience today, preparing an individual, household, or community for potential conditions of collapse. Thus, it is an approach to life that is justifiable even if (as is very likely) the ethos of voluntary simplification does not expand sufficiently to avoid the collapse of industrial civilisation. In a range of related social movements (permaculture, voluntary simplicity, degrowth, etc.), the ranks of simplicity thinking and practice are expanding, albeit, for now, very slowly. It seems that SMPLCTY is an idea whose time has not yet come. But I believe that such a time will eventually come, even if it takes hundreds or perhaps thousands of years.

Although the energy and resource flows are limited within this envisioned form of life, the exploration of the good life remains unlimited, in the same way that a pianist is not limited by the 88 keys of a piano. There will never be a time when all the beautiful sonatas have been written, just as there will never be a time when all possible manifestations of beautiful lives have been lived. Human beings are tasked with creating as an aesthetic project the meaning of their own lives. Within biophysical limits and upon sufficient material foundations, we are limited only by our imaginations. This is the bounded infinity of human flourishing.

The good life according to SMPLCTY is achieved primarily through aesthetic experience, both creatively (making art) and passively (appreciating art). This is an endless creative process of infinite diversity and stimulation. As I'm using the term, art refers both to conventional objects and productions (painting, music, sculpture, literature, etc) but also the artful products created by artisans (everyday artefacts that are both useful and beautiful). Indeed, as I have illustrated elsewhere,[59] human beings are related to their own lives in a manner that is akin to the relationship between sculptor and clay, imposing on us the exhilarating but terrifying burden of applying our own aesthetic criteria to the spiritual practice of self-fashioning.

Importantly, this can be understood as a means of solving a 'problem' within Tainter's framework – the problem of how to live a full and meaningful life – in ways consistent with the 'less is more' strategy of voluntary simplification. Within industrial civilisation, the human search for meaning is pursued in ways that are violent, unsustainable, unjust, and perhaps worst of all, largely unsuccessful. We now face the prospect of collapse sometime this century. My thesis is that voluntary simplification presents a meaningful alternative to collapse, grounded in an aesthetics of existence.

Taken to its logical extreme, this aesthetic vision of the good life culminates in a mystical blurring of art and life, where humans relate to each other neither as master and slave, nor as capitalist and worker, but in the reciprocal and revolving relationships of artist and art lover. This signifies an evolution from *homo economicus* (the archetype of industrial civilisation) to *homo aestheticus* (the archetype of SMPLCTY). This can be understood as the outcome of an underlying creative process: the Will to Live, evolving into the Will to Power, and culminating in the Will to Art.[60] Through this cosmological process, the aesthetic universe seeks to experience itself through the nodes of consciousness and creativity that have emerged in the fabric of existence.

The archetypal, self-governing citizen in SMPLCTY is the poet-farmer, who lives simply in a material and energetic sense, contributes to necessary economic production and community governance in non-hierarchical conditions, and who otherwise explores the good life through creative activity and aesthetic experience. There will of course be artistic 'geniuses' whose work captures and impresses the social imagination more than others, but the poet-farmer is an ordinary creative soul who revels in aesthetic practices without need or expectation of social recognition. This civilisation democratises the poet. Art does not replace religion in such a society, but it answers the same (and perhaps some new) spiritual needs, such that the artist comes to replace the priest as spiritual advisor and existential provocateur.

Having undergone an artful descent, an ecological civilisation will discover that it is good and worth preserving. The fundamental structural requirement of voluntary simplification does not otherwise contain or delimit the forms of life that can be created within biophysical constraints. An infinite diversity of aesthetic communities may arise, loosely networked for mutual support and appreciation. Eventually *homo aestheticus* might even evolve into *homo mysticus*, a state in which the poet-farmer, who has moved through the aesthetic condition, no longer has an urge to create beyond subsistence and rather finds *Being* enough. This represents the true and only End of Art. *Homo mysticus*, like *homo aestheticus*, is not a state of life-negation but of ultimate life-affirmation. As ever more time and energy are transferred away from materialistic pursuits, we will turn to the realm of the spirit to satisfy our hunger for infinity.

Over millions of years, these aesthetico-mystical communities will live creatively and sustainably, producing and appreciating unimaginable forms of art and aesthetic experience. So many artistic geniuses will emerge that anything resembling an exhaustive 'art history' will become impossible, and egotistical hopes of being 'remembered' will fade. There will be millions upon millions of Beethovens, Shakespeares, and Goethes, etc. to enjoy – as well as aesthetic exemplars as yet unimagined. Increasingly human beings will experiment with novel ways of immersing themselves in the deep well of aesthetic resources at their disposal, as if playing Herman Hesses's 'Glass Bead Game' as a form of life.[61] As the ideal of SMPLCTY is approached, beauty will beget beauty, and an aesthetic singularity will everywhere threaten to explode in a chain reaction of unfathomable spectacles of creativity and sensuous experience. The nature of this singularity is unknowable in advance, but it should be acknowledged as a possibility, even if we must then pass over it in silence, like all mystical phenomena.

Science tells us that at some distant point – perhaps in hundreds of millions of years – Earth will be swallowed by a black hole, destroyed by a comet, or become uninhabitable due to the heat-death of the sun. Accordingly, the human story is, ultimately, finite. Our cosmological contribution is our art – our human stories – all of which will one day be dust, blowing in the winds of a dark, cold, silent universe. After an indeterminate duration of cosmological expansion, the universe may implode into the singularity from which it emerged or expand at the speed of light, and the mysterious cosmological process might begin again, repeating this aesthetic cycle an infinite number of times, in eternal recurrence. This mystery needs and allows for no primal explanation. That the Will to Art exists at all is the marvel of all marvels.

To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, we are the music, while the music lasts.[62]

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[1] See my previous essays in this collection, especially 'The Cosmos as a "Readymade": Dignifying the Aesthetic Universe'; 'Creative Evolution and the Will to Art'; and 'Pessimism without Despair: Suffering, Desire, and the Affirmation of Life'. The full set will be available here: http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/ (accessed 10 May 2023).

[2] Samuel Alexander, *Prosperous Descent: Crisis as Opportunity in an Age of Limits* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2015).

[3] Samuel Alexander, *Art Against Empire: Toward an Aesthetics of Degrowth* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2017).
[4] See Samuel Alexander, 'Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: and Evolutionary Perspective' and Samuel Alexander, 'Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an "Aesthetics of Existence"' in this collection of essays. See link in note 1.
[5] I have discussed social and political policies and institutions in my other academic work on degrowth, permaculture, and energy descent. See, for example, my four volumes of collected essays, as well as *Degrowth in the Suburbs: A Radical Urban Imaginary* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2019, co-authored with Brendan Gleeson). Although I will discuss political issues further in the final substantive essay in this collection ('The Aesthetic State'), the basic approach of this project is even more fundamental. As Aristotle once remarked, before we inquire into what the best political arrangements are, what is needed is some conception of what a 'good life' consists of. These essays are attempting to clarify the nature of the good life as an aesthetic agent in an aesthetic universe, which is a way of providing normative foundations to my political views.
[6] This phrase is borrowed from Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (New York: Harper, 2010, 2nd edition).
[7] I have analysed the meaning of an 'aesthetic justification' of existence elsewhere. See Samuel Alexander, 'An Aesthetic Justification of Existence: The Redemptive Function of Art' in this collection of essays. See link in note 1.
[8] Samuel Alexander, *Sufficiency Economy: Enough, for Everyone, Forever* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2015).
[9] Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
[10] See Samuel Alexander and Amanda McLeod, *Simple Living in History: Pioneers of the Deep Future* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2014).
[11] Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
[12] Ibid.
[13] Joseph Tainter, 'Resources and Cultural Complexity: Implications for Sustainability' (2011) *Crit. Rev. Plant Sci.* 30: p. 33.
[14] Joseph Tainter, 'Problem Solving: Complexity, History, Sustainability (2000) *Population Environments* 22(1): p. 34.
[15] Joseph Tainter, 'Sustainability of Complex Societies' (1995) *Futures* 27(4): p. 400.
[16] See Samuel Alexander, 'Voluntary Simplicity as an Alternative to Collapse' (2014) *Foresight* 16(6): pp. 550-566.
[17] See generally, Vaclav Smil, *Energy and Civilization: A History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
[18] Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Routledge, 2017).
[19] I have discussed the slow development of technology in pre-history in my essay, Samuel Alexander, 'Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: An Evolutionary Perspective' in this collection of essays. See link in note 1.
[20] See Tainter, note 13, p. 24.
[21] Joseph Tainter, 'Social Complexity and Sustainability (2006) *Ecological Complexity* 3: p. 94.
[22] See Samuel Alexander and Joshua Floyd, *Carbon Civilisation and the Energy Descent Future* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2018); Joshua Floyd, Samuel Alexander, Manfred Lenzen et al, 'Energy Descent as a Post-Carbon Transition Scenario: How "Knowledge Humility" Reshapes Energy Futures for Post-Normal Times' (2020) *Futures* 122: 102565. I am indebted to David Holmgren for the concept of energy descent. I have also benefited greatly from discussing and writing about energy descent with Joshua Floyd, including its application to Tainter's work.
[23] Robert Ayres and Benjamin Warr, *The Economic Growth Engine: How Energy and Work Drive Material Prosperity* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2009).
[24] See Tainter, note 13, p. 26.
[25] See Tainter, note 15, p. 400.
[26] Joseph Tainter, 'Energy, Complexity, and Sustainability: A Historical Perspective' (2011) *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 1: pp. 93-4.
[27] Joseph Tainter, 'Social Complexity and Sustainability' (2006) *Ecol. Complex.* 3: p. 93.
[28] Ibid, p. 94.
[29] See Alexander, note 16.
[30] See Tainter, note 13, p. 31.
[31] Ibid (emphasis in original).
[32] See Tainter, note 21, p. 99.
[33] See Tainter, note 21, p. 91.

[34] See Tainter, note 13, p. 33.
[35] See Tainter, note 21, p. 99.
[36] See Tainter, note 11.
[37] See Tainter, note 21, p. 100.
[38] Ibid.
[39] See Tainter, note 26, p. 93-4.
[40] See Tainter, note 21, p.100.
[41] See Joseph Tainter, 'A Framework for Sustainability' (2003) *World Futures* 59: p. 215.
[42] See Tainter, note 26, pp. 93-4.
[43] See Tainter, note 41.
[44] See Tainter, note 13, p. 31.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Although the term 'voluntary' suggests that simplification is purely a choice to embrace or forego, it should be noted that while simplification is currently a 'choice', soon enough it may become *necessary* due to resource or energy scarcity that may *impose* simplification upon industrial civilisation. My argument, therefore, is essentially that simplification is coming whether we want it or not, so we should 'choose' and plan for this necessity (in advance of its imposition) rather than have it imposed upon us through collapse.
[48] See Tainter, note 13, p. 31.
[49] See, e.g., Samuel Alexander 'The Optimal Material Threshold: Toward an Economics of Sufficiency' (2012) *Real-World Economics Review* 61: 2-21.
[50] See Samuel Alexander and Brendan Gleeson, *Degrowth in the Suburbs: A Radical Urban Imaginary* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2019), especially Ch. 4; and Samuel Alexander, 'Voluntary Simplicity and the Social Reconstruction of Law: Degrowth from the Grassroots Up' (2013) *Environmental Values* 22(2): pp. 287-308.
[51] Samuel Alexander, *Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2013).
[52] See Tainter, note 26, p. 94.
[53] Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History: Abridgement of Volumes I-VI by D.C. Somervell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 198.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid. See also, Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* See note 9.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Toynbee, note 53, p. 199.
[58] John Michael Greer, 'Collapse Now and Avoid the Rush' *Resilience* (6 June 2012).
[59] See note 4.
[60] See Samuel Alexander, 'Creative Evolution and the Will to Art' in this collection of essays. See the link in note 1.
[61] See Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* (London: Penguin, 1972). I return to this novel in the concluding essay in this collection.
[62] See T.S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages' from *Four Quartets* (1941). Available here: http://www.davidgorman.com/4quartets/3-salvages.htm (accessed 2 January 2023).