

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



SAMUEL ALEXANDER

Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Poet-Farmer: A Thoreauvian Aesthetics

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I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavour. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so make a few objects beautiful, but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look.... To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts.

– **Henry David Thoreau**

Poet-Farmer: A Thoreauvian Aesthetics of Sufficiency

Samuel Alexander

In the previous essay I explored Joseph Tainter's analysis of the dynamics of civilisational development and collapse (see this endnote for a review).¹ When applied to today's globalised, industrial civilisation, a case can be made that we have already passed the point of positive returns on growth and complexity. Indeed, civilisation seems to be in a developed stage of decay or 'uneconomic growth', which is threatening to transform into unplanned, chaotic collapse as planetary boundaries are breached and financial systems tremble.² Such a descent could be driven by a confluence of any number of factors, including financial crisis, war, pandemic, resource scarcity, or the crossing of environmental tipping points.

One might think that an obvious and appropriate response to excessive complexity would be to embrace a strategy of 'voluntary simplification' – that is, creatively solving pressing societal problems while also reducing energy and resource demands. For example, cycling more and driving less would advance human health and environmental sustainability, perhaps even happiness, while also reducing energy and resource demands. Such strategies would also free up energy and resources to solve other problems. But Tainter attempts to show why this type of voluntary simplification is not usually available. He argues that solving problems typically requires energy and resources, from which it would follow that solving new or worsening problems requires *increases* in energy and resource use, not *reductions*.

In my critical analysis of Tainter's theory, I outlined why his pessimistic conclusions were based on an unduly narrow way of analysing and engaging societal 'problems'. I showed that if we rethink *which* societal problems are to be solved and in *which ways*, it is possible to adopt voluntary simplification (thus addressing ecological overshoot) while also solving key social problems (like eliminating poverty and achieving distributive equity). Of course, this would require profound shifts in the nature of the existing growth-orientated civilisation, not merely finding ways to make this civilisation sustain itself for a bit longer. I argued that a necessary part of any strategy for achieving this outcome, and escaping Tainter's tragic conclusions, is reimagining the good life beyond consumer culture, as well as building societal structures that support rather than inhibit a sufficiency-based a way of life.³ If overconsuming and overly-complex societies were to embrace post-consumerist conceptions of flourishing, the immediate benefit would be reducing energy and material demands, mitigating environmental pressures. But it would also free up scarce resources to solve other problems that humanity faces, without necessarily getting locked into the dynamics of complexity that Tainter outlines so powerfully.

According to this logic, voluntary simplification is an alternative to collapse, and I attempted to show why, in fact, it may be the *only* alternative.⁴ Furthermore, if it transpires that collapse cannot be avoided, then learning to get by with minimal but sufficient energy and material wealth remains an attractive living strategy to adopt. This is because it is likely to prepare

households and communities for the prospect of *involuntary simplification*, as economies contract due to the deepening of societal and ecological crises. This suggests that voluntary simplification ought to be pursued, irrespective of whether it is likely to be widely embraced. In short, we should aim for sustainability, but may have to settle for resilience.

I maintain that initiating and successfully prosecuting a process of voluntary simplification – or degrowth – will depend on an aesthetic transformation of tastes in relation to material culture. One of the central theses in this collection of essays is that the aesthetic capacities and sensibilities of humankind can be fully explored in rich and satisfying ways, while living ‘simply’ in a material and energetic sense. On that basis, I am proposing that expanding opportunities for artistic expression and aesthetic experience are among the best ways of moving toward a civilisation that is environmentally sustainable, socially just, and personally fulfilling. In that light I have employed the term SMPLCTY to refer to an ecological civilisation of simple living ‘poet-farmers’. These citizens would live aesthetically stimulating and diverse lives while mindfully constraining material and energy requirements.

Building on that vision of artful descent, in this essay I will turn to the life and philosophy of Henry David Thoreau to highlight an aesthetics of sufficiency that I maintain lies at the heart of SMPLCTY. Such an aesthetics underpins the living strategy of the poet-farmer, of which Thoreau is a fine exemplar. While this essay attempts to convey a material culture of voluntary simplicity mainly from an individualist perspective – from the perspective of daily experience – the social implications are unpacked further in the next essay, where the aesthetic ideas of William Morris are engaged. The final substantive essay (before the conclusion) takes the analysis a step further, into the realm of politics, by looking more deeply into the Schillerian concept of an ‘aesthetic state’. First, however, attention must be given to what voluntary simplicity might look like, and feel like, as a way of life.

Poet-farmer: The simple life of Henry David Thoreau

Few individuals in history evoke images of ‘the simple life’ more distinctly than the poet, farmer, and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau. In 1845, when Henry was 27 years old, he left his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, and went to live alone in the woods, near Walden Pond. There he built himself a small cabin and for two years earned a simple living mainly from the labour of his own hands. He spent his days growing his own food, writing poetry and philosophy, and sauntering through the woods, observing and recording the seemingly infinite wonders of nature in a state of prolonged fascination. It was a period of immense personal growth for Thoreau, during which he struggled productively with the question of how much material wealth – or, rather, how little – a person actually needs to live well and be free.

The main literary product of Thoreau’s time living in the woods was a book called *Walden* (1854).⁵ This is a dense, unclassifiable text that is part autobiography, part nature writing, and part ‘simple living’ manifesto, but which is now widely regarded as one of the classics of American literature. Not only that, *Walden* offers a penetrating critique of materialistic culture, one all the more piercing due to the fact that Thoreau was both a ruthless social critic and highly skilled in the art of poetic expression. This makes for engaging and often

challenging reading, especially at those times when we might see ourselves in the object of Thoreau's often scathing cultural and economic critiques.

In today's era of overlapping ecological, economic, and cultural crises, *Walden* is a text that is more relevant than ever before. As well as providing early insight into the destructive and oppressive nature of many processes of industrialisation, this prescient book also warns people of the self-imposed slavery that can flow from mindlessly dedicating one's life to the never-ending pursuit of 'more'. If nothing else, Thoreau's life and writings serve as a fiery, poetic reminder that there are alternative, simpler ways to live – forms of life which are freer and indeed more fulfilling than those governed by consumerist values and practices.

Thoreau's central message, as I reconstruct it below, is that a life of material sufficiency is all that is needed to fully explore one's aesthetic capacities. In our age of ecological overshoot, I contend that this is a message deserving of the closest attention, for it suggests that energy descent futures involving planned economic contraction, or degrowth, are not inconsistent with human flourishing. Indeed, reimagining the good life beyond consumer culture presents itself as the only path available for living well, sustainably, and justly on a finite planet with eight billion people (and counting). This is not to suggest that personal practices of voluntary simplicity alone will ever be enough to produce an ecological civilisation. But it does suggest that an ecological civilisation implies voluntary simplicity, and indeed, that profound shifts in relation to material culture may need to precede the systemic changes which are also needed.

In that light, I will now review the main threads of Thoreau's life story. My purpose is not to provide a guide on how to live a simple life or to explore what structures might be needed to facilitate such a cultural shift (two subjects I've written about extensively elsewhere).⁶ Rather, my new contribution will be attempting to highlight how the emergence of any post-consumerist material culture will depend on what I am calling an aesthetics of sufficiency. In other words, my argument is that contemporary *tastes* must shift with regards to material culture before there is much hope of an ecological civilisation emerging through political action. As I have suggested, a cultural or aesthetic revolution must precede the political transformation, and if it does not, any political transformation is likely to merely reproduce the old world soon enough. If this position is accepted, it should influence the question of political strategy, for it would imply that any politics of ecological civilisation might need to be founded upon an aesthetics of sufficiency. Put otherwise, a society must develop a *taste* for degrowth before there is much chance of an economics or politics of degrowth. Developing such a taste is a central task of aesthetic education.

Thoreau on materialistic culture

In order to understand what drove the young Henry Thoreau out of his township and into the woods, it is necessary to acknowledge the context in which he was living. The middle of the nineteenth century was a time when the Industrial Revolution was really taking hold in the United States. From Thoreau's perspective, his contemporaries were getting seduced by the extraordinary productive power of industry and machines, without putting their minds to the question of why or to what end they were expending all their efforts and labours – or at what cost. The railroad was the defining emblem of industrialisation in Thoreau's eyes, and he often

wrote of it metaphorically, as a representation of the emerging economic system that was fast changing the face of the United States and indeed the world. 'We do not ride upon the railroad,' he asserted, 'it rides upon us.'⁷

Thoreau had travelled widely in his province, but everywhere, in shops, offices, and fields, the inhabitants seemed to him to be living lives of 'quiet desperation',⁸ committing themselves to 'nothing but work, work, work'⁹ in order to pay for their rising material desires. 'The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor.'¹⁰ Thoreau likened people's materialistic cravings to the heads of a hydra, noting that 'as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up.'¹¹

The ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu, once said: 'He who knows he has enough is rich.'¹² Thoreau was telling his contemporaries that they had enough, but that they did not know it, and so were poor. Always wanting more luxuries and comforts, and never content with less, Thoreau felt that people did not understand the meaning of 'Economy', did not understand that 'the cost of a thing is the amount of ... life which is required to be exchanged for it'.¹³ 'Most [people],' he insisted, 'even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance or mistake, are so occupied with factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them.'¹⁴ By a 'seeming fate', there was 'no time to be anything but a machine'.¹⁵

And for what? People's lives were being 'ploughed into the soil for compost'¹⁶ just to obtain 'splendid houses' and 'finer and more abundant clothing ... and the like'.¹⁷ But as Thoreau would insist: 'Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only'.¹⁸ Indeed, he claimed that 'most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.'¹⁹ More concerned about accumulating nice things or climbing the social ladder than they were about their own destinies, people astounded Thoreau with how 'frivolous'²⁰ they were with respect to their own lives. The following passage states his position directly:

If I should sell my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing left worth living for... I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living.²¹

But Thoreau saw his townsfolk labouring under this very mistake. 'It is a fool's life,' he declared bluntly, 'as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.'²² It was the English poet William Wordsworth who wrote, 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers', and we can imagine Thoreau being wholly sympathetic to that critical sentiment. It appeared to Thoreau as if his fellow citizens were falling into the consumerist mode of living not because they preferred it to any other, but because they honestly thought there was no choice left. 'So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say.'²³

Thoreau was not convinced. He was of the view that 'there are as many ways [to live] as there are radii from one center',²⁴ and a consumerist existence was only one of the options available,

and by no means the wisest choice. ‘Even the life which [people] praise and regard as successful is but one kind’, and ‘why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of others?’²⁵ Forever the thoughtful non-conformist, Thoreau tended to believe that ‘[w]hat old people say you cannot do you try and find that you can’,²⁶ and on that basis he boldly proposed that there should be ‘[o]ld deeds for old people, and new deeds for new.’²⁷ Surely, he thought, there were more fulfilling ways to live. On Independence Day, 1845, Thoreau began his living experiment out in the woods, near the shores of Walden Pond.

The Walden experiment

In the second chapter of *Walden*, entitled ‘Where I Lived, and What I Lived For’, Thoreau offered a direct explanation for his exit from conventional society. ‘I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what they had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I have not lived.’²⁸ Elsewhere he said that his purpose in going to Walden Pond was to ‘transact some private business with the fewest obstacles.’²⁹ In one sense this ‘private business’ was simply to write in solitude, close to nature, and away from modern distractions. In another sense, though closely related to the first, his motivation was to solve, or at least better understand, the *economics* of living well. What is the proper relationship to adopt in relation to money, possessions, and other forms of material wealth? How much is enough? What is an economy *for*? How best to earn a living? Thoreau had decided that, perhaps, the best path was to reduce his material needs and desires and to live a simple life. Simplicity of living was to be his means to the elevation of meaning and purpose – his path to genuine freedom.

Thoreau suspected that, ‘If your trade is with the Celestial Empire’³⁰ – by which he meant, if your concerns are ‘higher’ than merely getting and spending – then very little is actually needed to be happy and free, provided life is approached with the right attitude. ‘Simplify, simplify’³¹ was to be his refrain. One should not need an impressive house, fancy clothes, exotic foods, or extravagant possessions to live well. Those things are not the stuff of true satisfaction. They are superfluities, often merely distractions. Thoreau argued that by minimising consumption people could find themselves with more freedom to pluck the finer fruits of life, in ways that may not always be obvious.

This, in essence, exemplifies the way of sufficiency Thoreau put to the test at Walden Pond, by living simply and largely rejecting the division of labour. As far as possible he grew his own food, and drank water from the pond. He cut down some trees and built himself a cabin with but one small room, and made some furniture. It was not much, but it was enough. And just enough was plenty. Thoreau did not wish to be chained to the economy, so he practised self-reliance; he did not wish to be slave to artificial material desires, so he practised self-discipline; and he did not wish to live what was not life, so he avoided wasting his precious time working to acquire more than he needed.

How much is enough?

In order to live a full and free life, Thoreau felt that one must begin by thinking seriously about what really are the necessities of life, ‘for not till we have secured these are we prepared to

entertain the true problems of life with freedom and prospect of success'.³² This passage is important because Thoreau was seeking to avoid a misunderstanding that might arise from his celebration of material simplicity. Simplicity is not material destitution, he is saying. We all have basic physical needs that have to be met (though they may be fewer than we commonly think). But once those basic needs are met, we are not obliged to dedicate our lives to the pursuit of more. Thoreau proposed that when people have obtained those things necessary to life, 'there is another alternative than to obtain superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, [our] vacation from humbler toil having commenced.'³³

Thoreau was warning us not to assume that material wealth will always contribute positively to our lives, for often, in insidious ways, it will not. It is not that there is anything inherently evil about money or material things; it is just that each moment we spend pursuing such things beyond what is necessary is a moment we could have spent on some free, non-materialistic good – such as talking with friends, walking through the woods, meeting our civic duties, being creative, or just relaxing. Sometimes trading our time for money and things will be a good trade, no doubt. But sometimes such a trade will ultimately cost more than it is worth, making us not richer but poorer, and thus be a bad trade.

This can apply both at the individual level, as Thoreau highlighted, but also, as Joseph Tainter argued, at the societal level. That is, sometimes the pursuit of more energy and resources can cost more than it comes too, as the marginal utility of consumption and complexity declines and eventually becomes negative. Conversely, as I am proposing, sometimes deliberately reducing or moderating consumption and complexity through voluntary simplification can be life-enhancing. The simple life, however, is never a destination but always a process. Both individually and socially, this way of life demands constant evaluation of the question 'how much is enough?' in relation to the question 'enough for *what*?' This will need to remain a dynamic evaluation, given that the answers to both questions might shift over time.

With respect to clothing, Thoreau expressed his simplicity by reflecting on his own modest attire: 'if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do will they not?'³⁴ It is an interesting question to consider, if not in relation to the worship of God, necessarily, then more generally in relation to the living of a passionate life. Old clothes will do, will they not? Thoreau proposed that they will do just fine. He is not glorifying the poor or prescribing to us a dress code. He is attempting to get us to reconsider cultural assumptions about the importance of material things (in this case clothing) to a well-lived life. His argument is not that one cannot live a happy and meaningful life in fine clothing, so much as fine clothing is not necessary for a happy and meaningful life. If so, he would suggest that we do not waste our freedom labouring superfluously to purchase fine clothing. Thoreau's point was that if our goals are 'higher' than materialism, acquisitiveness, and social status, we should recognise the limited need for money and possessions in our lives. '[M]y greatest skill has been to want but little,'³⁵ he proclaimed.

Thoreau made essentially the same point with respect to shelter. An average house in his neighbourhood cost about eight hundred dollars (at the time) and Thoreau noted that to lay up this sum would take from ten to fifteen years of the labourer's life; add the farm and one would have to spend twenty, thirty, or forty years toiling – more than half of one's life is easily

spent. Would the American Indians have been wise to give up their modest but functional tepees on these terms? Thoreau had his doubts, suggesting that ‘when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him.’³⁶

Thoreau wanted to show at what sacrifice our more ‘advanced’ dwellings were obtained. He suggested that, by living more simply, we might secure all the advantages without suffering any of the disadvantages. With this in mind, he went to Walden Pond with a range of hand tools, cut down some trees, and in about three unrushed months had built himself a modest but sturdy cabin. Again exemplifying his alternative mode of economic analysis, Thoreau declared that, ‘I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more [in terms of life] than the present one.’³⁷

It appears, then, that Thoreau was perfectly content with his shelter, modest though it was. Did this not make him richer than a king who is dissatisfied with his palace? With a little more wit we could *all* be richer than kings, Thoreau implied; but, unfortunately, ‘Most [people] appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have.’³⁸

Thoreau’s philosophy of voluntary simplicity is neatly summed up in the following passage: ‘I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely.’³⁹ This is perhaps the most important lesson that he learned while living in the woods, and it was a lesson that stayed with him for the rest of his life. We might not have a pond nearby to replicate Thoreau’s living experiment, and we might not want to live alone in the woods. But in an age where a minority of the global population grossly overconsumes Earth’s resources while billions live in destitution, Thoreau offers profound lessons in simplicity, moderation, and mindfulness that remain applicable to the analysis of the contemporary world.

Nevertheless, when engaging the question ‘how much is enough?’, Thoreau insisted that we must each find our ‘*own way*’.⁴⁰ As noted, this is not so much a destination as it is an ongoing creative process. Thoreau was not interested in giving anyone detailed instructions on how to live a simpler life; nor did he want to save us the trouble of thinking for ourselves. Rather, he wanted to stoke the fire in our souls and inspire us with ideals. ‘Don’t spend your time in drilling soldiers,’ he once wrote, ‘who may turn out hirelings after all, but give to the undrilled peasantry a *country* to fight for.’⁴¹ He wanted to inspire people to seek meaning in life beyond materialistic acquisition and accumulation, and he believed that doing so leads to the tantalising insight that human flourishing requires less material wealth than previously thought. Practices of mindfulness in relation to material culture can offer liberation from the false needs that are so often imposed upon us by consumer capitalism.



By the time he died in 1862, Thoreau had acquired a degree of fame as a philosopher and environmentalist, although the amount of money he earned from his writing and lecturing over his entire life was minimal. Nevertheless, the fact that his books, essays, and poems barely

sold was of little consequence. He had woven literary baskets of a delicate texture, and although he had not made it worth anyone's while to buy them, he felt that it had nonetheless been worth his while to weave them.⁴²

Thoreau's life is a reminder that dedicated individuals can explore simpler, freer, ways of life by adopting a new frame of mind and acting upon it with creativity and conviction. Doing so may not be easy, of course, since it will involve moving in the opposite direction to where most of humankind is marching. But as Thoreau would say, 'If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.'⁴³

An aesthetics of sufficiency

The theory and practice of voluntary simplicity has been explored at length in the scholarly literature and popular literature.⁴⁴ Over the years I have made my own contributions, both in terms of cultural analysis and in terms of political and economic analysis.⁴⁵ For present purposes, I will not restate those analyses or review the literature, but instead attempt to offer something new by examining voluntary simplicity from an aesthetic perspective. My argument is that the practices of voluntary simplicity will not be widely embraced – necessary though they may be – until new tastes are developed in relation to material culture. Moreover, in ways to be explained, I believe that those new tastes for simple living may be developed most effectively through aesthetic rather than rational means (or, better still, through both at once). In what follows, then, I will return to some of the key aspects of material culture that Thoreau confronted (e.g., clothing, housing, food, etc) and consider them from an aesthetic perspective.

An aesthetics of the self

Although my focus below will be on the aesthetics of material culture, I begin this inquiry by returning to the notion of self-creation, previously examined in relation to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty.⁴⁶ The logic here is simple: in order to develop new tastes in relation to material culture, people educated into consumerist lifestyles might need to reshape their subjectivities through practices of 'self-fashioning'. One of the central insights of Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence' was that the self is not something to be discovered but rather something that needs to be *given form*. Notably, this insight was already well developed in Thoreau's practical philosophy of voluntary simplicity. He would have been very sympathetic to the Foucauldian ideas of 'self-fashioning' and the 'art of living', as the following passage makes clear:

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavour. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so make a few objects beautiful, but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look.... To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts.⁴⁷

Similarly, in the conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau urged us all to 'live the life [we have] imagined.'⁴⁸ All individuals, he maintained, are tasked to make their life, even in its details, 'worthy of the contemplation of [their] most elevated and critical hour.'⁴⁹ He thought that

there are as many ways to live ‘as there can be drawn radii from one center,’⁵⁰ and he desired that there ‘be as many different persons in the world as possible.’⁵¹ But he also saw ‘how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves,’⁵² how easily we fall into the ‘deep ruts of tradition and conformity.’⁵³

This troubled Thoreau, for he thought that if we do not live *deliberately* – that is, if we only get out of bed because of ‘the mechanical nudgings of some servitor’⁵⁴ – then we are just sleepwalking through life, injuring eternity by killing time. ‘Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius.’⁵⁵ Thoreau is speaking not so much to geniuses here, as to the genius (or poet) in us all. Take yourself and your life seriously, he is saying. Do not let yourself be swept along. Claim your freedom and exercise your capacity to create your own fate. Compose yourself! WAKE UP! ‘Moral reform’, Thoreau proposed, ‘is the effort to throw off sleep... To be awake is to be alive.’⁵⁶

As scholar Carl Bode put it: ‘[Thoreau] believed that his job was to become a writer but a writer in a noble Transcendentalist way – a poet first in what he did and next in what he wrote.’⁵⁷ The poet’s noblest work, according to Thoreau’s ambitious conception of the poet, was one’s life, and poetry or prose would grow out of that life. With a slight change in the language, this could easily be interpreted as a Foucauldian perspective: ethical practice, it could be said, is the effort to transcend the subjectivities that have been imposed upon us by society and to give form to oneself through deliberate self-fashioning. To compose oneself is to be free, and Thoreau’s message in *Walden* was that freedom requires (among other things, of course) a wise and disciplined relationship to material culture. This was a wisdom and discipline that he believed was largely absent from his own society, and it is easy enough to infer what his views would be on consumerist cultures today.

As outlined in the essay on Friedrich Schiller,⁵⁸ if we are to create or re-create ourselves, aesthetic education may be needed to induce the state of ‘play’ that is required to loosen the grip of our ‘normal’ sense of self. Schiller argued that in a state of play we are more open to experimenting or ‘playing’ with how we craft our lives. In this condition of aesthetic freedom, we are more volitionally open to trying different things, exploring different ways of living, and becoming someone new. Schiller did not believe, however, that play had any necessary implications – it didn’t mean that we *would* choose differently, or if we do choose differently, play does not constrain *what* those choices would be. But playfulness is a state of aesthetic freedom which makes choosing differently possible and more likely. This is because it expands the imagination in terms of the range of lives that could be lived and leaves us less constrained by habitual ways of living. I believe that such volitional openness is a first step in transcending consumerist subjectivities – by freeing ourselves from ourselves. In short, through exposure to art and aesthetic education we are more likely to be artful ourselves. Or, as William Morris put it: ‘that which most breeds art is art.’⁵⁹

Clothing

Beyond an aesthetics of the self, how might new tastes for sufficiency manifest in relation to material culture? Let me start by turning to clothing, this being the domain of life where we express our personal aesthetics or ‘style’ most noticeably and immediately. The primary

purpose of clothing is to keep us warm and its secondary function, at least in modern times, is to cover nakedness. That being said, those functions have been marginalised in consumer societies today, where clothing's purpose has evolved to be primarily about expressing one's identity or social status. There are powerful cultural expectations to look a certain way depending on context, and since fashion changes so quickly, there is social pressure to constantly upgrade and expand one's stock of clothing. These aesthetic expectations drive consumerism and the growth economy at the expense of a healthy environment, creating socially corrosive cultures overly focused on cosmetic concerns and status signalling.

In a post-consumerist society, the importance of high fashion would presumably be drastically reduced or even disappear. Clothing might come to be seen as an exterior shell that says little or nothing about the depth of a person's character. Moreover, in an age of ecological overshoot, spending extravagantly to always look 'brand new' would be recognised as a cultural practice that was neither necessary nor something deserving of social admiration. Accordingly, sustainability seems to imply a radical alternative to the consumerist aesthetic prevalent in affluent societies today. Along these lines, Thoreau suggested that any necessary or important work may be accomplished without adding to our wardrobes. 'A [person] who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to do it in.'⁶⁰ Beware then, he wrote, 'of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather the new wearer of clothes.'⁶¹ With regard to personal appearance more broadly, it can be confidently inferred that Thoreau would reject today's 'cult of youthfulness', which treats aging as a process that ought to be disguised at any cost. In a sane society, something as natural as going grey or developing wrinkled skin would be no cause of shame.

Of course, human beings have always expressed themselves through what they wear and how they present themselves in society, so we should expect that 'style' would not so much disappear as evolve in an ecological civilisation. But such new forms of style would reflect the ethics and aesthetics of sufficiency that would come to shape material culture in all domains of life. In comparison with affluent societies today, people adopting an aesthetics of sufficiency would generally have fewer changes of clothing, and happily embrace second-hand items wherever possible. Limited wardrobes could nevertheless be worn in creative ways and arrangements. This would require many people to rethink their 'image' in light of the new aesthetic, including their 'self-image', in ways that might require a deliberate reshaping of the self by the self. New clothing would be made from organic fabrics, sustainably produced, which itself would create a different 'look'. Clothes would be mended as often as necessary before being repurposed or composted, and the art of sewing might return to many households as a meaningful and pleasurable form of creative labour.

Furthermore, in an ecological civilisation, it can be surmised that clothing would be functional, comfortable, and durable, so there would be no worry about lying down on the grass if the mood called for it, opening up new opportunities for a simple and sensuous reconnection with nature. Neckties, high heels, and ostentatious displays of expensive jewellery would likely disappear as relics of a bygone era, meaning that even the 'feeling' of clothing would change, not merely the 'look'. A time would come, no doubt, when people wearing high fashion or practising 'fast fashion' would be the ones perceived as lacking style and taste. Conversely, the creative and eccentric clothing makers and stylists would be the ones socially admired and

sought after. At such a time, it would be clear that a new, creative, and highly localised aesthetics of sufficiency had emerged, laying the foundations for a politics of sufficiency.

My argument is that such aesthetic shifts in relation to self and style may need to *precede* changes in political economy, given that the structures and institutions of political economy will not serve ecological ends until the outcomes of an ecological civilisation are *desired*. Put otherwise, if there is no taste for simplicity, then the social forces needed to drive changes in the political economy will be lacking. The dictum from poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge deserves restatement: we must create the taste by which we will be judged.

Housing

On the path toward an ecological civilisation, a similar aesthetic evolution might need to shape both our homes and how we furnish them. In contrast to the resource and energy intensive McMansions that are increasingly prevalent today (especially in the United States and Australia), housing in an ecological civilisation would develop a taste for ‘small is beautiful’.⁶² A modest but sufficient house minimises the materials and time needed for building, as well as shrinking the spatial footprint, thereby minimising pressure on urban sprawl. Most importantly perhaps, a small house reduces the energy needed to heat and cool it, especially if well designed in terms of materials, orientation, window placement, and insulation. Less space also incentivises frugality and minimalism, as there would be little room for material clutter and superfluous accumulation. The following line from William Morris perfectly reflects the aesthetics of sufficiency under consideration: ‘Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.’⁶³

According to this aesthetic, more furniture might be homemade (perhaps even the house itself); building with mudbricks or cob might become more common, changing the look of neighbourhoods; more spaces would be dedicated to home-based production (e.g., arts, crafts, and gardening) rather than merely consumption; renovations would rarely if ever be merely cosmetic; and the piano rather than the television might become the heart of the lounge. It should be clear, then, that nothing here suggests that homes in an ecological civilisation would be ugly. Instead, an evolution in taste implies that the sense of beauty and style would be very different, reflecting a humble aesthetics of sufficiency rather than the slick uniformity of modernist chic. Scarcity begets creativity.

Beyond the simplicity of one’s material possessions, Thoreau thought that there is something important in the *aesthetic experience* of providing for oneself, of being self-reliant, that has been lost as a result of so-called ‘modern improvements’ and capitalism’s extreme division of labour. He wondered whether ‘if [people] constructed their dwellings with their own hands... the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged.’⁶⁴ But, alas, he lamented, ‘we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built.’⁶⁵

‘Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?’⁶⁶ Thoreau asked, noting that never in all his walks had he come across anyone engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building their own house. ‘Where is [our] division of labor to end? And what

object does it finally serve? No doubt another *may* also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.⁶⁷ Thoreau had come to believe that his contemporaries were endeavouring to solve the problem of their livelihoods by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. 'To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle.'⁶⁸ In contrast, Thoreau attempted to show that, if one were prepared to live simply and with more self-reliance, people could 'become richer than the richest are now.'⁶⁹

Thoreau's calculus here is essentially the same as it was regarding clothing. Perhaps it would be nice to live in a palace or a mansion or even the nicest house on the block. But it must not be forgotten that the more expensive one's housing is, the more life one will probably have to spend earning the money needed to buy or rent it.⁷⁰ Furthermore, he asked rhetorically: 'what is the use of a fine house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?'⁷¹ From this perspective, why not keep our housing modest and simple? Given that housing is the greatest overall expense in most people's lives, this is an area where we should be cognisant of the time and freedom cost of consumption. This is especially so, Thoreau argued, given that 'the cost of a thing is the amount of... life which is required to be exchanged for it'.⁷²

The paradoxical insight being offered here is that by lowering the 'standard of living' (measured by consumption in housing) people could actually increase 'quality of life' (measured by subjective well-being)? Indeed, Thoreau was suggesting that by embracing an aesthetics of sufficiency and living in modest accommodation, people could literally save years if not decades of labour and thereby become 'richer than the richest are now,'⁷³ not in terms of property, of course, but in terms of freedom and contentment. 'If I seem to boast more than is becoming,' he concluded, 'my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself.'⁷⁴

Food

Continuing with basic material aspects of life, I will now turn to consider food from an aesthetic perspective. One of the more perverse aspects of the industrial-consumerist aesthetic is the bizarre expectation today for visually perfect, unblemished fruit and vegetables in supermarkets. This can result in vast amounts of perfectly edible food being thrown away or left to rot on account of it being aesthetically unacceptable to the contemporary consumer. This highlights how aesthetics can have moral and political implications. Furthermore, the aesthetic demand for exterior perfection is generally achieved through industrial application of chemical pesticides and herbicides, and tends to impact negatively on the food's taste and nutrition.

In an ecological civilisation, this industrial-consumerist aesthetic would need to be transcended. A culture might emerge in which it would be considered tasteless to throw away good food if even a single person went hungry, and cosmetic blemishes would not be considered flaws but merely the inevitable result of natural, organic production. Similarly, it would be seen as bad taste to eat meat from factory farms, and in general meat consumption would be greatly reduced due to environmental (especially climate) impacts, and the heightened sensibility with respect to animal welfare. Thus the picture of an ordinary meal could begin to look very different from the highly processed, meat-heavy diets prevalent in the

West and increasingly elsewhere. This would likely result in a new engagement with cooking styles, tastes, and recipes.

Given that diets would probably be healthier on account of these changes, the very aesthetic of human bodily shapes would likely transform in an ecological civilisation, with a reversal of the obesity epidemic. In terms of home production of food, the tidy but unproductive lawns and nature strips common today would be dug up and planted with fruit trees and vegetable gardens, transforming the 'look' of the suburbs and reminding people of the changing seasons. The productive permaculture garden or food forest might become new status symbols as the new aesthetics of sufficiency took root in culture, a corollary of re-localising and decarbonising the economy.

This analysis exemplifies how a shift in something as seemingly insignificant as 'taste' can have far-reaching societal implications. Personal distaste for factory farming, as well as developing taste for local organic food, might not only change the look of our dinner plates, but come to impact on political economy (e.g., the shutting down of factory farms as demand dries up), urban landscapes (e.g., more food gardens, fewer lawns), and even the human form (e.g., healthier diets, healthier bodies). Moreover, a renaissance of home gardening would reconnect people with natural systems and flows, shifting the sensuous experience of daily life in positive ways. This would help ameliorate the 'nature deficit disorder' which has been diagnosed in modern societies (a subset of what I've called the aesthetic deficit disorder).⁷⁵

Most of these themes were prefigured in the life and philosophy of our poet-farmer under consideration, who grew most of the food he ate. Growing his own food, however, came to be something much more than a matter of physically sustaining himself. In a chapter of *Walden* entitled 'The Bean Field', Thoreau tells us that:

I came to love my rows, my beans... They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antæus. But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows. This was my curious labor all summer — to make this portion of the earth's surface, which had yielded only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like, before, sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers, produce instead this pulse. What shall I learn of beans or beans of me? I cherish them, I hoe them, early and late I have an eye to them; and this is my day's work.⁷⁶

I am reminded here of the passage by novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (a contemporary of Thoreau's) in which he talks with similar devotion about his own vegetable garden:

I used to visit and revisit it a dozen times a day, and stand in deep contemplation over my vegetable progeny with a love that nobody could share or conceive of who had never taken part in the process of creation. It was one of the most bewitching sights in the world to observe a hill of beans thrusting aside the soil, or a rose of early peas just peeping forth sufficiently to trace a line of delicate green.⁷⁷

Thoreau admitted that, since he had little aid from horses, cattle, or hired labour, or from the latest farming implements, he was 'much slower' in his work than other farmers.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he claimed that he became much more 'intimate' with his beans on this account and that his slower more personal approach yielded a 'constant and imperishable moral.'⁷⁹

This moral, he seemed to think, was that the fastest and most efficient way of farming, that is, the way that would yield the most profit in the market, was not necessarily the best way, *all things considered*. As philosopher Philip Cafaro has noted, Thoreau ‘makes a point of doing most of the work himself, rather than contracting it out to more productive specialists with more elaborate tools. He does not, he tells us, bother with “imported” fertilisers. These moves would increase his productivity, but he refuses to allow that to dictate how he will farm.’⁸⁰ Furthermore, Thoreau could have hired himself out as a day labourer and for much less effort been able to buy his food at the grocer, but he chose not to. Doing so would have left him relying on others first to hire him and second to produce and then sell him his necessities.

But Thoreau’s reasons for living simply go deeper even than securing his independence and freedom. Allowing others to grow food for him, even if it was more ‘efficient’ or ‘economic’ to do so, would also have disconnected him from the land, from direct contact with Nature, that is, from the elemental source of both his material and spiritual nourishment. And Thoreau would have no truck with that. He did not just want the beans to eat; he also wanted the *sensuous experience* of cultivating them. In ‘The Bean Field’ we get an insight into the nature of his labours. Being outside, he tells us, working up a sweat under the morning sun and sky, hoeing his beans in the fresh country air, ‘yielded an instant and immeasurable crop.’⁸¹ At such times, he noted somewhat cryptically, it ‘was no longer beans that I hoed,’⁸² suggesting, we can suppose, that he was cultivating not so much the land as his own soul.⁸³

Thoreau delighted at being ‘part and parcel of Nature.’⁸⁴ The chickadees became so familiar with him that at length one even perched upon an armful of wood which he was carrying, pecking at the sticks without fear. ‘I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing... and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn. The squirrels also grew at last to be quite familiar, and occasionally stepped upon my shoe when that was the nearest way.’⁸⁵ Thoreau would listen to the brown thrashers as he worked his rows and would carefully observe the wildlife on the edge of his field. As he was not driven by an urge to maximise profits, and was thus in no real hurry, he could rest on his hoe and watch the hen-hawks circling high in the sky, ‘alternately soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts.’⁸⁶ Philip Cafaro captures the significance of these and similar experiences:

To a poet-naturalist, opportunities for such encounters, even opportunities to feel changes in the weather and mark the natural course of the day, are strengthening and vivifying. Thoreau contrasts this work with factory and office work, suggesting again that the experience lost is not made up in increased pay or productivity.⁸⁷

Today more than ever before, this Thoreauvian calculus deserves serious consideration. But it will take some concerted imaginative effort on our part to broaden our view of things, since Thoreau suggested that the typical, entrenched urbanite, who is highly dependent on the grocer and who lives and works mostly indoors, can barely comprehend what it could even mean to be ‘part and parcel of Nature.’ And until we have some sense of its richness, some sense that there is another, simpler, more intimate way to provide for ourselves, we are likely to continue doing economics in the usual, narrow fashion and structuring our lives

accordingly, not knowing what we have lost, or, rather, what the market economy and its division of labour has taken from us. ‘This is the only way, we say.’⁸⁸

Broader implications of an aesthetics of sufficiency

In the discussion above I considered an aesthetics of sufficiency from four key perspectives, relating to self-fashioning, clothing, housing, and food. This type of analysis could be applied to all aspects of life, some of which I now briefly note in closing. Consider, for example, the aesthetics of transport and travel. In consumer societies today, the automobile sits alongside clothing and housing as an object of consumption that is often designed and desired in order to convey wealth, success, and status. But according to an alternative aesthetics of sufficiency, the Lamborghini or Porsche would be considered a bit tacky, extremely wasteful, destructive, and contrived – certainly not something considered beautiful or to be envied or admired. There would be far more interesting and important things to focus on, for as Henry David Thoreau would say: ‘Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only.’ Or, as Epicurus put it: ‘Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you do not have.’

In an energy descent future, life would likely be embedded in a highly localised society, whereby people’s main forms of transport would be cycling or walking. Aside from the environmental benefits, this would be a positive aesthetic innovation because it would increase the human connection with nature, keep us fit, and expose us to the elements in ways that would enrich our sensuous experience of the world. Again, this would be a remedy for ‘nature deficit disorder’. With good wet weather gear and adequate lights, even cycling home at night in the rain can be a sensuous delight, as many cyclists already know. This is what might be called an ‘acquired taste’ – something that might seem unpleasant until you actually do it and discover its gift of gentle exhilaration.

Rather than go on holiday in homogenous luxury resorts overseas, the practitioner of an aesthetics of sufficiency would sooner take the family camping in the local national forest or beachside village, again transforming our sensuous experience of the world in ways that could enhance our lives, provided we had developed a ‘taste’ for simplicity, nature, and the outdoors. This could open the door to what is today called ‘alternative hedonism’ or ‘frugal hedonism’ – that is, simpler ways of living that explore the various potentials of living ‘more with less’.

By creating a post-carbon way of life, members of an ecological civilisation would avoid experiencing in their day-to-day existence the worst climate impacts, signifying one of the most extreme aesthetic benefits of a sufficiency-based way of life. The wind farm would be perceived as a vista of supreme beauty, enriching the landscape, not something aesthetically objectionable. At the household level, the impression of a ‘good sized’ family might tend toward one child. In matters of detail, not flushing urine to save water might raise aesthetic objections from within the consumer mindset but become the ‘new normal’ in the consumer society of an ecological civilisation. Similarly, using a composting loo to create ‘humanure’ might offend the squeamish bourgeois sensibility, and yet defecating in drinking quality water might offend an alternative sensibility that emerges in SMPLCTY.

Furthermore, an ecological civilisation would likely produce vastly different urban and suburban landscapes, where advertising and cars were increasingly absent, de-polluting the visual, aural, and mental environments. Thus people would be freer to have thoughts of their own, liberated from the attention-demanding industrial-consumerist aesthetic. Even the arts themselves would doubtless evolve. The corporate production of formulaic pop music, rapid television shows, and meaningless ‘spectacles’ of performance art, might lose their hold on society and create cultural space for a rebirth of authentic, local art, uninfluenced by the promises or seductions of the globalised market economy.

All this, of course, returns us to the question of ‘story’ and its importance, both in terms of self and society. Mending one’s clothes or growing one’s own food within the Old Story might be considered by many to be a shameful requirement, symbolising an unsuccessful life of poverty. But within the New Story I am trying to tell of degrowth, permaculture, voluntary simplicity, and related movements, such practices would be seen and experienced as a fulfilling exercise of creativity. They would be examples of frugal hedonism – small but meaningful acts of ecological care that draw social admiration and offer aesthetic rewards.

Each element in life looks very different depending on the underlying narrative that gives those elements context. Accordingly, ‘story’ can be understood as the meta-aesthetic issue that shapes the ‘taste’ we have for various aesthetic forms, values, and practices. An ecological civilisation therefore requires stories of self and society that transcend the consumerist story. This implies a new aesthetics of existence, from which a ‘taste’ for SMPLCTY could emerge.

¹ Tainter’s theory is based on what he calls the diminishing marginal returns of complexity. By this he means a process of civilisational development in which the benefits of societal complexification diminish over time. At first a society proceeds through phases of significant beneficial growth in complexification, where new institutions, technologies, and social practices emerge that solve societal problems and thereby improve the lives of most people. Thus complexification is experienced as progress. But given that the benefits of complexification seem to decline over time (owing to the lowest hanging fruit being picked first), there comes a point when further growth in complexity stops offering net benefits and begins to impact negatively on a society. Eventually all the energy and resources a society has available are invested in solving *existing* problems, meaning that when *new* problems arise, as they inevitably will, they cannot be solved. At such a point, society enters a phase of deterioration. When declines in complexity occur swiftly, as they sometimes do, this is experienced as societal collapse – or involuntary simplification. With some persuasive force, Tainter maintains that his theory explains the rise and fall of civilisations in history better than any other. See Samuel Alexander, ‘Artful Descent: A Cosmodycy of SMPLCTY’ in this collection of essays. 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 Without attempting anything like an exhaustive review, some preliminary literature to begin with includes: Thomas Homer-Dixon et al, ‘Synchronous Failure: The Emerging Casual Architecture of Global Crisis’ (2015) *Ecology and Society* 20(3): 6; William Ripple et al, ‘World’s Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency’ (2021) *BioScience* 71(9): pp. 894-898; Thomas Wiedmann, Manfred Lenzen, Lorenz Keyber, and Julia Steinberger, ‘Scientists’ Warning on Affluence’ (2020) *Nature Communications* 11: 3107. See also, see the reports by David Spratt and Ian Dunlop, published by the Breakthrough Institute, which review and analyse the latest climate science. Available at: <https://www.breakthroughonline.org.au/publications> (accessed 20 April 2023).

³ Most of my academic work addresses this broad research agenda. See www.samuelalexander.info (accessed 10 June 2023).

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- ⁴ See, e.g., Samuel Alexander, 'Voluntary Simplicity as an Alternative to Collapse' (2014) *Foresight* 16(6): pp. 550-566.
- ⁵ Henry Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1982), pp. 258-572.
- ⁶ See note 3.
- ⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 345.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 263.
- ⁹ Henry Thoreau, 'Life without Principle' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 632.
- ¹⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 260.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*.
- ¹² See Goldian Vanenbroeck (ed), *Less is More: The Art of Voluntary Poverty* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1991), p. 116.
- ¹³ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 286.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 261.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 270.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 568.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 269.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, p.262.
- ²¹ Thoreau, 'Life without Principle, note 9, p. 636.
- ²² Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 261.
- ²³ *Ibid*, p. 266.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 274.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 264.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 343.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 275.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, p. 344.
- ³² *Ibid*, pp. 267-8
- ³³ *Ibid*, pp. 270-1.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 278.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 324.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 288.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 304.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 290.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 325.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*.
- ⁴¹ From Thoreau's journals, as quoted in Leo Stoller, *After Walden* (1957), p. 123.
- ⁴² See Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 274.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. 564-5.
- ⁴⁴ I have edited a collection of some this literature. Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* (Whanganui: Stead and Daughters, 2009).
- ⁴⁵ See note 3.
- ⁴⁶ See Samuel Alexander, 'Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an "Aesthetics of Existence"' in this collection of essays. The full set will be available at the link in note 1.
- ⁴⁷ See Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 343.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 562.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 343.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 266.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 325.
- ⁵² *Ibid*, p. 562.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 342.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 343.

⁵⁷ See Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 15.

⁵⁸ Samuel Alexander, 'The Politics of Beauty: Schiller of Freedom and Aesthetic Education' in this collection of essays. The full set will be available at the link in note 1.

⁵⁹ William Morris, 'The Beauty of Life' in William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures by William Morris*. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/index.htm> (accessed 10 May 2023), para. 11.

⁶⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 278.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).

⁶³ As quoted in Sara Wills, 'William Morris', in Samuel Alexander and Amanda McLeod (eds) *Simple Living in History: Pioneers of the Deep Future* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2014).

⁶⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 300.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. 300–1.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 301.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 288.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 295.

⁷⁰ I have addressed the complicated and critically important issue of access to land elsewhere. See Alex Baumann, Samuel Alexander, and Peter Burdon, 'Land Commodification as a Barrier to Political and Economic Agency: A Degrowth Perspective' (2021) *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 86: pp. 355-78.

⁷¹ Henry Thoreau, Letter to Harrison Blake (20 May 1860).

⁷² Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 286.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 295.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 304.

⁷⁵ On the notion of 'nature deficit disorder', see Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2008).

⁷⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, pp. 404–5.

⁷⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New edn, 1857).

⁷⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 406.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 406.

⁸⁰ Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: "Walden" and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia, 2004), p. 98.

⁸¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 408.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ The sensuous experience of a Thoreauvian life was exquisitely captured by William Butler Yeats, in his poem 'The Lake of Isle of Innisfree' which unambiguously references Thoreau's time living by the pond:

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

*And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.*

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

⁸⁴ Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking' in Carl Bode (ed.), *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 592.

⁸⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 518.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 409.

⁸⁷ Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics*, above note 80, p. 99. Thoreau's point is not that factory and office work are not valuable. His suggestion is that the drive to maximise profits is disconnecting more and more people from the simple pleasures of contact with nature in their working lives. Thoreau is questioning whether the increased profits that arise from factory and office work is worth that disconnection from nature.

⁸⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, note 5, p. 266. Thoreau also quotes Confucius: 'To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge.' (p. 267).