

Our Next Evolutionary Leap: Net Consumers to Net Contributors

Upon formulating his famous equations for electromagnetism, James Clerk Maxwell was reportedly strolling in the town square with his fiancée and, pointing up to the starlight, remarked "You know, I'm perhaps the only one in the world who knows what that is." Well, I believe I've identified a principle of similar scope and import as pertains to the evolution of human society.

Anyone who reads the newspaper is aware by now that the progressive vision we aspired to in the past Century now seems to be faltering. Social institutions, the economy, the environment are all showing signs of strain. Are we simply hitting a few bumps on the road of Progress that can be fixed with more legislation, technology, growth, moralizing, education, or another electoral cycle? No, consistent longer-term trends in economic disparity, environmental degradation, cultural polarization, and political and corporate malfeasance all suggest that a more fundamental and profound event is underway.

After watching these trends for several decades, their common dynamic and the cultural shift needed is becoming clear: as a species, we need to move from functioning in the world as net consumers, toward becoming net contributors - to others, to our community, culture, and to the world at large.

"Net consumer" simply means, on the whole, taking in more energy than one gives back to the system. "Energy" in this case refers to the total range of things consumed in the course of daily living: food, physical materials, environmental resources, monetary resources, governmental resources, the emotional resources, time, and attention of others - anything that can be depleted and must be restored. "Net contributor", on the other hand, is something or someone who gives back more than he, she, or it receives - one who essentially leaves the system better off - more "energized" - than he found it.

Parenting is an apt illustration of the above contrast. It is commonly accepted that children are perpetual centers of need, and that the duty of the "good" parent is to give and give, without expecting some sort of fair compensation. (That's why you have to get even with your kids in old age!)

Apart from physical resource consumption, there is a social dimension to the above that is far more profound. In a world of net consumers, everyone is a real or potential competitor. With a limited supply of goods, everyone cannot come out ahead - the gains of one must be offset by the losses of another. ("Growth" temporarily delays this effect, but growth can't occur indefinitely in a closed system.) This being the case, everyone, even family and friends, might be opponents - people to be feared and mistrusted. (If you don't believe this, sit in on a divorce proceeding or the reading of a family will.) This systematic undertow of competition and mistrust is responsible for much of the loneliness, alienation, depression, and loss of meaning in our culture - and beyond this, the resultant destructive coping mechanisms like addiction and over-consumption.

Having needs and enjoying their fulfillment is a normal, natural part of living. And, as the parenting analogy suggests, in the developmental stage of any living system, it is natural to consume more than is produced. There's nothing wrong with consumption per se - we couldn't exist without it. It simply needs to be balanced with at least an equivalent amount of creation. (Unfortunately, our culture currently values the opposite - getting the most while giving up the least is simply considered "good business".) For all the history of life up until now, living organisms have functioned as net consumers - existential children - seeking to grow and to obtain the best that life has to offer. But now the system - both the social and the natural world - is under stress and needs our help and consideration.

That's what makes the current moment in time so significant and exciting. The world's needs are clear, and we now have the awareness and opportunity to grow into adulthood, becoming

responsible managers and benefactors to the world. Accordingly, which following activity seems a more noble and interesting challenge? To continue to accumulate more stuff and experiences, sitting in the nest, chirping with our mouths agape - or to evolve up a level, joining the creators, and fashioning a world that supports every living component in reaching its highest potential to manifest the kind of love and creativity that produces more than it consumes?

Paraphrasing an old John F. Kennedy quote: "Ask not what life/the gods/your world can do for you, ask what you can do for life/god/world."

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