

# SMPLECTY

**Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art**



**SAMUEL ALEXANDER**

**Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence**

*Answering Estragon: Art, Godot, and Utopia*

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\* This is a provisional Table of Contents. The essays are being published individually as they are completed, meaning that this project is a work-in-progress which may evolve.

‘Vladimir: Say you are, even if it’s not true.  
Estragon: What am I to say?  
Vladimir: Say, “I am happy.”  
Estragon: I am happy.  
Vladimir: So am I.  
Estragon: So am I.  
Vladimir: We are happy.  
Estragon: We are happy.’

– ***Samuel Beckett, ‘Waiting for Godot’***

# *Answering Estragon: Art, Godot, and Utopia*

Samuel Alexander

In the epigraph for this essay, taken from Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, we hear the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who are sitting by the roadside, state that they are both happy. After realising that their existential circumstances persist despite their declarations, Estragon says to his companion: 'What do we do now, now that we are happy?' Vladimir responds: 'Wait for Godot.'<sup>1</sup>

It becomes apparent that neither of the tramps is quite sure who Mr Godot is, why they are waiting for him, or even if they are waiting at the correct time or location. The play ends without resolution, leaving the audience none the wiser. When Beckett himself was asked who or what Godot was, he replied: 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play.'<sup>2</sup> Both acts finish with one of the tramps, tired of waiting for a man who never arrives, saying to the other: 'Well, shall we go?', to which the other responds: 'Yes, let's go.'<sup>3</sup> Neither of them move, and the curtain closes.

In this play, as in all his work, Beckett is expressing his bleak view that the human situation is objectively meaningless and without any discernible purpose. We have all been thrown into an empty and indifferent universe, in which we suffer, suffer some more, and then die. The best we can hope for, like a tramp chewing on an old carrot, is that we get used to the muck as we go along. We keep waiting for the meaning of life to announce itself, to arrive – whether in the form of God, Godot, the Revolution, consumer satisfaction, fame, or whatever. But Godot does not objectively exist 'out there', so we feel that it is necessary to invent him. Life is what happens while waiting for Godot.

When – or if – our Godot arrives, Vladimir assures us, 'We'll be saved.'<sup>4</sup> But he never arrives. And so we wait, suffering, without understanding why. Life is absurd. At some point, the curtain closes and, without metaphysical comfort or understanding, our existence expires. Worms slowly consume our decaying bodies. The end. Absolutely. Life's mystery is never resolved and there is no moment of redemption that offers us consolation for our transcendental loneliness. We're just endlessly dead.

The lines about happiness in *Waiting for Godot* always struck me as central to Beckett's profoundly pessimistic worldview. They are especially unsettling to people who are interested in the political question of what societal structures might best advance human flourishing – or at least reduce unnecessary suffering – in a just and sustainable way. Beckett makes the disconcerting point that the question of life's meaning would remain unanswered, even when or if a person or society were fortunate enough to attain happiness. What do we do now, Estragon would ask, now that we are happy? Attaining happiness might even induce a profound existential crisis, for we would confront the question of life's meaning (or lack thereof) directly. We'd stare into the abyss, as Nietzsche said, only to find the abyss staring

back.<sup>5</sup> Is happiness all there is? Is it the ultimate value for which we ought to be striving? Mightn't we discover that life is tragic and absurd, even in a 'happy' utopia?

In *Civilization and its Discontents*,<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud made a compelling case that happiness itself is an unrealistic goal for our species. Human nature, he argued, is driven by various sexual and aggressive drives that we must restrain in order to live according to the norms of civilised society. But repressing our primal and anti-social urges to maintain social order forces us to 'bottle things up inside', as the saying goes, leaving our psyches merely fluctuating between hysterical misery and ordinary unhappiness. For Freud, like Beckett, the search for transcendental meaning is a lost cause – religion is an illusion – and happiness is simply not part of the 'plan of creation' for human beings. Are we thus condemned both to meaninglessness and unhappiness?

Consider this utopian thought experiment: Suppose the industrial growth economy solves the 'economic problem' of poverty and manages to provide material affluence for all. Assume also – if you can imagine the impossible – that this globalisation of consumer lifestyles is achieved without fatally degrading planetary ecosystems. Due to the automation of production, everyone in this society now has an abundance of stuff as well as an abundance of free time. Furthermore, constitutionally protected civil liberties afford everyone an equal opportunity to shape their own life. For the sake of argument, I invite readers to imagine that this utopian society is structured according to their favourite vision of political economy (e.g., capitalism, socialism, anarchism, etc). In this world of universal affluence and leisure, what would we do with our lives? In what condition would we find our species?

All at once it becomes clear that the permanent problem of human existence – the question of life's meaning – would remain entirely unanswered, despite the affluence and the leisure. Indeed, as implied above, the problem of what to *do* with our freedom might well become more acute than ever. With the traditional purpose of life resolved (the economic struggle for existence), there might even be a risk of society-wide nervous breakdown, the onset of a profound cultural malaise.<sup>7</sup> Faced with the burden of our own freedom, we might become more unhappy than ever, choosing instead a shallow, cosmetic existence, full of 'entertainments', simply to contain our anxieties and distract us from our empty condition. The following lines of verse come to mind:

*Don't mourn for me, friends, don't weep for me never  
I'm going to do nothing for ever and ever.*<sup>8</sup>

It is possible, I suppose, that in this affluent society human beings might pass their time eating nice food, enjoying exotic vacations, talking about cosmetic house renovations, sleeping in the sun, watching sport, making love, and drinking fine wine. This sounds like a good life, or at least good enough, full of earthly pleasures and entertainments. Whether they are happy or not, many of the world's most affluent people spend their days like this, even if the vast majority of the human population still suffer in material destitution. But I wish to suggest that for most people in this utopian society, one day a 'why' would arise, and the existential problem of life's meaning would come to saturate consciousness. Like a stone in one's boot, these lingering questions could not be ignored; they would follow us around everywhere we went.

An acute state of affluenza might set in as we came to realise our pre-packaged, consumptive lifestyles were akin to ‘doing nothing for ever and ever.’

One dark night of the soul we might face the source of our simmering discontent: is consumer affluence all there is to life? Is it the proper goal of our earthly struggles? Should the pursuit of economic growth without limit define and structure our political economies? In the affluent utopia I have sketched, at some point our lives would become tinged with an unsettling existential doubt about these questions. We would begin to wonder whether we had been foolishly climbing a ladder that had been placed against the wrong wall. Staring at our diamond-studded Rolex, we might enter a state of hallucination and find the watch posing unsettling questions: Is this it? Is this the peak of civilisation? Has superfluous consumption and entertainment lifted us to the heights of human achievement and capacity?

From an existential or spiritual perspective, I contend that we would come to see that material comfort was no longer ‘enough’. It never was enough and never will be. Despite what consumer advertisements imply, human beings are not creatures that could ever be truly satisfied with ‘nice things’, merely. At most they provide cosmetic, pleasing distractions, or ego-boosting status signals, in an otherwise difficult and often tragic existence. Material abundance is preferable to material destitution, of course, but ultimately the superfluities of consumer lifestyles are spiritually beside the point, representing a failure of imagination, a mistaken idea of wealth and freedom. Consciously or unconsciously, most of us, it seems, seek meaning in ways that market commodities simply cannot offer, even if our actions often betray this insight. In a utopian society of universal affluence, whenever we look at our Rolexes we’d be reminded of the passing of time, the approaching spectre of death, and thereby confront the question: What shall we do now, now that we are happy?

Utilitarian philosophers would have no answer for Estragon, given that happiness within that paradigm is considered *fundamental*, and thus the question isn’t even coherent. The most a utilitarian could say is that the tramps should aim for *more* happiness, since happiness is the fundamental good; the ultimate value; the benchmark of success in life. We should just continue marching along the hedonic treadmill and shouldn’t ask why or to what end. At some stage, however, happiness, in the sense of a comfortable life of leisure, material abundance, and sensuous pleasure, will not satisfy the inquiring mind – the spiritual seeker. If we found ourselves living in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), soon enough we would start doubting – like the protagonist, John – whether a happy life induced by the drug ‘soma’ was a satisfactory way to live. Eventually we would want to live *deeper*, and that leaves open the possibility of passing up a comfortable and happy life and choosing a meaningful life, even if that entails increased suffering. Choosing meaning over happiness doesn’t make sense within a utilitarian framework that posits happiness as the ultimate value. The best a utilitarian could do is fudge their central value, conceding that meaning is the highest good but insisting, by definitional fiat, that we must call this happiness. But that’s another way of saying that utilitarian philosophy, at base, gets things wrong.

A similar challenge could be made to ‘rights-based’ philosophers of justice who ground their political theories, not in happiness, but in freedom. What would we do with our lives if we managed to attain freedom, Estragon might have asked? Beckett suggests that we would be

free only to endure the horrors of ‘this bitch of a world.’<sup>9</sup> In *Waiting for Godot*, even the wealthy, slave-owning character, Pozzo, who occasionally makes an appearance, certainly didn’t seem content with his wealth, status, and power. He was suffering the human predicament just as the tramps were, only in different material and social circumstances. Beckett suggests that, fundamentally, Pozzo and tramps were experiencing the same old shit – an absurd existence – by virtue of sharing the same human condition. We see this today in the twisted faces of those ‘lucky’ celebrities, whom we would be wise not to envy. They, too, are still waiting for Godot. Affluence and fame seem to be inadequate, misconceived life goals. Emptiness remains, even or especially in a nice car surrounded by a crowd of adoring fans and enthusiastic photographers.

If the dominant theories of justice in our time seek to maximise either happiness or freedom, it would seem that they have failed to ground political society on an accurate appreciation of the human situation. Those philosophers are quite right, of course, to value happiness and freedom – even if, at times, these values conflict due to their incommensurable natures. It would be a strange creature who declined or rejected freedom and happiness if they were on offer. But if we were to achieve those goals, my point is that we would still face the uncertain question of life’s meaning. We would still be left waiting for Godot, who would never arrive, biding time until we were relieved of our existential predicament by death. This would be the case even if we were sitting poolside with a bittersweet cocktail.

Admittedly, human existence might be given a sense of purpose as we *struggle* for happiness and freedom, and some people achieve a genuine sense of purpose by struggling to advance the condition of others. Albert Camus, for example, in closing his essay on the myth of Sisyphus, suggested that the struggle itself is enough to fill our hearts: ‘One must imagine Sisyphus happy.’<sup>10</sup> But Beckett’s unrelenting pessimism is highlighted when he implies that, having attained happiness or freedom, we might discover that our struggles had been in vain, that life remains meaningless, even if everyone were happy and free. Our struggles would have been merely a distraction from the inescapable tragedy that is human existence, which, in the haunting words of Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, is merely a ‘sickness unto death.’<sup>11</sup> Refusing to make any ‘leap of faith’ into either religion or rationalistic metaphysics, Beckett arguably took pessimism to its logical extreme – rivalling the ‘great pessimist’ Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Both writers articulated the harshness of the human predicament in the most powerful and compelling ways, without any hope of consolation or redemption.

This reasoning suggests that what is needed is a politics of meaning, and I believe this insight draws us necessarily into the realm of art and aesthetic experience. In a world without God, and where neither human reason nor material affluence can provide answers to life’s mysteries, it seems to me that art and aesthetics are the best tools we have for negotiating the problems of human existence; the best tools for creating meaning and managing absurdity by engaging absurdity; the best tools for sublimating our primal desires and converting those psychological tensions into personally or socially useful, stimulating, or at least benign, creative activity. What is art if not the creative engagement with questions of meaning? What is beauty if not the definitive, albeit temporary, source of existential consolation?

Despite engaging in utopian speculation about an affluent society, it should be clear that my purposes in this essay have been entirely practical and pragmatic, related to the here and now. These ruminations on happiness, freedom, and meaning can be taken as philosophical touchstones, an invitation to explore ways of negotiating Beckett's unmitigated existential pessimism. Rather than wait in futility for Godot, even if one were to attain happiness and freedom, I am proposing that 'make art' and 'contemplate art' are the best and fullest responses that human beings have to Estragon's (hypothetical) question: what do we do now, now that we are happy?

I arrive at these conclusions by conceiving of human beings not as mere consumers, but as artists, with an innate urge to engage in creative and aesthetic activity, driven by the Will to Art.<sup>12</sup> As we struggle toward an ideal society, I believe we will universally become what we already are – artists – broadly defined to include not merely practitioners of the 'fine arts' but also those who exercise and explore their creative imaginations and aesthetic capacities in daily living. Through our art and aesthetic experience, we might grapple with the eternal mysteries of our strange existence, exploring our creative potentials, and revelling in the profound aesthetic pleasures of sharing our art and experiencing the art of our fellow human beings. The inherent and delightful ambiguities in art also serve a social purpose, as we come to engage each other in social discourse as we struggle meaningfully to understand and digest great art and our relation to it. I believe art can assist with managing an absurd universe like *nothing else can*. If there is any truth to this, then we might consider, as a social project, the goal of universalising and maximising opportunities for aesthetic engagement with our absurd existence, so that humanity might attain a degree of spiritual peace – or, with a nod to Freud, at least convert our neuroses and misery into ordinary unhappiness.

Of course, we are not living in a world where affluence has been universalised. The point of my thought experiment, however, was to highlight why consumerism – the dominant notion of the good life today – is a misconceived vision of prosperity, one unable to assist with living in an absurd universe. Do not art and aesthetic experience provide more coherent ultimate values? What if these aesthetic values came to orientate and guide our lives, our economies, our education, and our politics? This obviously wouldn't mean material provision was unimportant. It would only mean that material provision and economic growth were not considered as ends in themselves but rather a means to aesthetic ends. When material pursuits and the urge to accumulate receive too much of our life energies, we discover – as affluent society today is discovering – that 'superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only',<sup>13</sup> as Henry Thoreau once wrote. There is an emptiness to affluence that simply cannot satisfy the human craving for meaning. The developed consciousness of *homo aestheticus* demands meaning, and this is both a blessing and a curse. It is the source of life's profound richness but also the cause of our unique struggles. It would be easier to be a cat.

If opportunities for art and aesthetic experience are the highest good for a species such as ours, then it follows that we should structure our social, economic, and political institutions, and shape our own lives, to support that vision. This essay is a further step in my attempt to explore and encourage that approach to life and society. This should not be interpreted as an elitist position that holds up the 'artistic genius' as being of more worth than the rest of us who are less able to capture the social imagination with our creative activity. And it doesn't look to art

at the expense of justice but rather to serve social (and ecological) justice. Against the grain of most ‘aestheticist’ philosophy, I counterpose an egalitarian and communitarian celebration of ‘human as artist’. This contrasts, for example, with the aristocratic celebration of the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche’s philosophy – although, to be fair, one can offer a creative reading of Nietzsche in which a communitarian ethic seems more consistent with his worldview than the admittedly elitist sounding passages in his oeuvre which dismiss ‘the herd’. In any case, my goal, to be developed further in due course, is to ‘democratise the poet’, by highlighting the ways in which there is genius and poetry in us all, a lesson powerfully advanced by the likes of Friedrich Schiller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and William Morris.

I have outlined the problematic vision of an affluent utopia and engaged the questions to which it gave rise. From here I will invite readers to work backwards from this derivation of ultimate value to explore how humans might respond to the problem of existence today, and what implications this might have on questions of political economy. My speculative question – what do we do now, now that we are free and happy? – was designed to shed light on the human condition in ways that can guide action here and now, in a world which perhaps seems closer to dystopia than utopia. Political economy today, global capitalism, is designed to maximise growth, the planet be damned. If there is a vision implicit to this economic system, it is that the rich get richer and the poorest eventually catch up. Not only is this ecocidal, but my point has been that if we ever achieved that goal, we’d discover we’d been chasing a false target. A politics of meaning, in contrast, would ensure that everyone had ‘enough’ to explore their aesthetic potentials as artist and art-lover. This vision is inconsistent with any economy focussed on economic growth as a good in itself and any culture that searches for meaning in consumer goods and services.

Of course, ‘make art’ was also the answer Samuel Beckett gave through the course of actually living his life, even if this lies in direct contrast with the answer he gives in his writing, which was: ‘wait for Godot’. Why Beckett said one thing and did another is a question that admits no easy or clear answer. Perhaps the tramps’ injunction to ‘wait for Godot’ wasn’t Beckett’s positive answer or advice but rather his view on how human beings, living in bad faith or in fear of freedom, actually spend their days. Beckett couldn’t escape the fact, however, that writing itself is a form of revolt and an expression of care – a rejection of the belief that ‘nothing matters’ or that ‘everything is meaningless’. As the narrator utters at the end of Beckett’s novel *The Unnameable*: ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on.’<sup>14</sup>

If people were to reflect on the analysis above and come to agree that ‘making and contemplating art’ is a promising means of managing existential challenges, then it would follow that material affluence and hi-tech industrial society are not needed to ensure these ultimate aesthetic values are attained. The major premises of this collection of essays are, first, that material sufficiency is all that is *needed* for a good life of artistic activity and aesthetic contemplation; and, secondly, that sufficiency is all that is *possible* for an ecologically viable existence on a finite planet. If we need art to help us manage absurdity, and that lifestyles of artistic creation and contemplation need not cost the Earth, there is a sense in which I can be understood to be offering ‘hope without optimism’.<sup>15</sup> I have not established the case herein, but I invite readers to consider the possibility that, just maybe, art can save us from capitalism, and that ‘[b]eauty will save the world.’<sup>16</sup>

Here the implications of my analysis become apparent, for it provides grounds for a radical critique of existing society. If industrial growth economies are trying to provide material affluence for all as a path to the good life, then our global mode of political economy is structured in ways that are neither necessary for satisfying our deepest needs (autonomous creative activity and aesthetic experience) nor sustainable (since globalising affluence is demonstrably unsustainable). In short, industrial civilisation is suppressing the creative nature of our species by grossly overvaluing material affluence while at the same time undermining the environmental foundations for universal artistic opportunity. We can, and must, do better, and I'm suggesting that aesthetic interventions in the world are amongst the best ways to achieve an ecological civilisation of artists and art lovers. In creating this new form of aestheticised society, art is both the means and the end.

The vision of political economy I am working toward is one that I will call the *aesthetic state*. This implies that societal structures would be collaboratively designed so as to maximise opportunities for self-governing human beings to practise and contemplate art, as well as immerse themselves in nature's beauty, while minimising material and energy demands of the economy on a finite planet. This will involve considering what implications this aesthetic worldview might have on questions of distributive justice, sustainability, and the good life. Specifically, in order to answer the economic question, 'How much is enough?', one has to answer the normative question: 'Enough for what?'. I am presenting 'art' as an answer to that normative question, and upon that premise I am proposing that a humble, non-consumerist life of voluntary simplicity provides 'enough' material wealth to live a full and artful life of infinite diversity, sensuous pleasure, and imaginative possibility. Throughout this collection of essays, art has been defined broadly as the pleasurable and meaningful expression of creative labour. This conception of art has been defended as the fundamental value and ultimate end point for an aesthetic species, such as ours, in an aesthetic universe, such as this.

On that basis, my goal is to examine the role and importance of art and the artist in *non-utopian* societies such as our own, for within today's capitalist dispensation, artful living upon 'sufficient' material foundations seems to be the exception rather than the rule. I diagnose this as an aesthetic deficit disorder, a discordant condition that I believe can only be harmonised through art. This is related to matters of *taste* – and it is to such matters that I now turn more directly. After all, to paraphrase the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge: we must create the taste by which we will be judged.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> See Nasrullah Mambrol, 'Analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*' *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Available at: <https://literariness.org/2020/07/27/analysis-of-samuel-becketts-waiting-for-godot/> (accessed 20 April 2023).

<sup>3</sup> See Beckett, note 1, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2004).

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<sup>7</sup> John Maynard Keynes, 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren' in John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) pp.321-332.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Keynes, 'Economic Possibilities', note 8, p. 327. Keynes references these lines as 'the traditional epitaph written for herself by the old charwoman.'

<sup>9</sup> See Beckett, *Godot*, note 1, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (London: Penguin, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> See Samuel Alexander, 'Creative Evolution and the Will to Art' 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).

<sup>13</sup> Henry Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 568.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable* in Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1955).

<sup>15</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 370.