



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Beyond Ego-Dominance

Brian Martin, University of Wollongong, bmartin@uow.edu.au

Martin, Brian. 2022 "Beyond Ego-Dominance." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (10): 9-13. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7fU>.

Escaping Maya's Palace: Decoding an Ancient Myth to Heal the Hidden Madness of Modern Civilization

Richard Sclove

Karavelle Press, 2022

347 pp.

Contemporary societies have many well-documented shortcomings, but is there a fundamental problem everyone is missing? And how would we go about discovering such a fundamental problem? How about reinterpreting an ancient epic for hidden psychological insights?

This is the implausible yet intriguing premise for *Escaping Maya's Palace*, a new book by Richard Sclove based on many years of investigation. His central concern is that ego-based thinking and institutions are causing serious damage to society while preventing humans from achieving higher mental states.

I first made contact with Dick Sclove in the 1990s. We shared interests in the critique of science and politics, and we knew and appreciated each other's work. Dick was especially interested in citizen participation in technology policy, an issue that had some currency at the time. Dick's experience in this area culminated in his 1995 book *Democracy and Technology*, which remains one of the most articulate and thorough treatments of how these two domains ought to mesh.

His hopes for citizen participation in choices and uses of technologies were idealistic in the 1990s. In October 1993, Dick emailed me with these observations:

As to how to implement participation, incl. participatory design—there's a modest chance of some political success now in the U.S. E.g., I met a couple of days ago with a senior Senate staffer and an assistant director of the White House Office of Science and Tech Policy, and they were both very enthusiastic about the kinds of things I've been talking about. Obviously, that's a long way from anything really changing, but the end of the Cold War coupled with some progressive appointments [President Bill] Clinton has made have definitely changed the political climate here. People I talk to in the national government are more progressive and open-minded than each other realize, or than people outside of Washington, DC realize. I figure there may be a 3 year strategic window of opportunity to try to get some interesting policies adopted—3 years, or else a post Cold War system of science & tech institutions will have consolidated that will be as undemocratic as the old one.

In retrospect, it's fair to say that the window of opportunity closed, if it ever existed, and prospects for participatory technological design seem to have further declined. Think of the giant companies in information and communication technology, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and military technology. Citizens are positioned as consumers. We may use Facebook and

Google but have precious little influence on the process of innovation and commercial promotion.

Dick was and is an engaged intellectual. In the 1990s he was executive director of the Loka Institute, studying the systemic effects of technologies and pushing for citizen participation in science and technology policy. Later, as stated in his book, he “served as the director of strategic development at the Mind and Life Institute, cofounded by the Dalai Lama, and as a project director at the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.” He is a scholar but hasn’t followed the usual career path in universities and research institutes.

Learning from Myths

Escaping Maya’s Palace is a critique of contemporary society, analysing the interplay between economics and psychology. But it starts in an unusual way, with an original interpretation of the *Mahabharata*, a vast epic from ancient India. What would an old legend have to tell us today? Sclove sets out to show us.

Here I won’t try to describe the *Mahabharata*, which deals with struggles between groups, power, wealth and the loss of them. It sounds like other ancient myths, except perhaps more elaborate. Sclove takes this legend and interprets the struggles of people in psychological terms, as involving the dangers of being dominated by concerns shaped and distorted by the ego, and showing the need for transcendence. Maya’s palace is the ego trap that we metaphorically need to escape. Sclove’s approach reminded me of one of my favourite books on happiness, Jonathan Haidt’s *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006), which compares and contrasts ancient wisdom and insights from modern psychology.

After his engaging exploration of an ancient Indian saga, Sclove shifts to analysis of today’s society. For me, it felt like a jolt back to the familiar terrain of social critique, except that Sclove never lets go of his interpretation of the *Mahabharata*, continually returning to it as a sort of beacon in his journey through the psychological destruction wreaked by capitalism. So what’s wrong with society, according to Sclove? The fundamental problem is a cycle, a dynamic process, by which the way society is organized prevents people from accessing higher levels of psychological development. Put crudely, people are preoccupied with material concerns—money, possessions, career, fame, power—at the expense of spiritual concerns. They are never satisfied with what they have, are always seeking more, and are prone to depression, anxiety and addictions.

How does this process operate? Sclove develops his analysis in a gradual, careful manner that is a model of clear exposition. To skip the detail, the process is that today’s market economy breaks down close personal relationships, the sort found in extended families and communities organised around local economic production, atomising individuals and making them feel rootless. To compensate for the loss of meaning from a close-knit community, people seek fulfilment from consumption, driving the economic system, which in turn further undermines close personal relationships, replacing them with commercial transactions.

For decades, researchers have surveyed people around the world, asking them how happy they are. One striking finding is that average reported levels of happiness have hardly changed despite dramatic increases in per capita annual income. For example, after World War II, income per capita in Japan increased by a factor of five but happiness just fluctuated around a constant level. On a social level, pursuing happiness via material prosperity seems to be a never-ending quest. Others have come to the same conclusion, for example Tibor Scitovsky (1976) in his book *The Joyless Economy* and Robert H. Frank (1999) in his book *Luxury Fever*. Alan Roberts (1979) in *The Self-Managing Environment* wrote how consumerism was used by ruling elites to divert demands for self-fulfilment in work and life. These and others have delved into the interplay of economics and psychology, but do not address “psychospiritual development,” a term Sclove uses regularly.

Psychospiritual development can be thought of as rejecting or disregarding a search for happiness through acquiring things and status and instead pursuing an understanding of and feeling for one’s place as part of community and nature. This can be taken in a religious sense, or in terms of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow [1966] also wrote about psychology and epistemology) or in a Buddhist way as getting beyond the self. It can involve practices such as meditation.

A Scholarly Taboo

So what’s new? Surely there is plenty of research into spiritual practices, and many people use meditation to calm their minds. But Sclove says this is a one-sided engagement with the spiritual. He says there is a scholarly taboo: “*Thou shalt not acknowledge the potential for psychospiritual development past ego-identification*” (132). This means that researching this area is off limits or is toxic to one’s career. Sclove says he knows many researchers who privately seek spiritual enlightenment but tell him that if they talked about this in teaching or research, they would be discredited. When it comes to meditation and other spiritual practices, most studies focus on instrumental effects, hardly ever transcending the ego.

In scholarly work, it is quite acceptable to use disciplinary tools to analyse spiritual texts. What is off limits is using insights from spiritual texts to inform disciplines. Sclove also notes that while disciplinary specialisation enables knowledge-building, it also protects an ego-orientation. This is one way to understand the long-standing denigration, within some disciplines, of transdisciplinary investigations. If escaping the disciplines allows escaping the self, disciplinary gatekeepers prefer to keep control over knowledge and restrict sources of insight.

Economic theory, in particular, never acknowledges psychological or psychospiritual development. In Sclove’s picture, the theory is tied to egoic assumptions. This reflects the theory’s conception of the real economy, with its relentless quest for growth that government and corporate leaders tout as good for everyone. Most people buy into this picture. This all makes sense. If most people were satisfied with their material conditions, they would spend less, and the market economy would suffer.

In one sense this is not new. It is well known that marketers seek not just to satisfy needs but also to create wants, to make people dissatisfied with what they have so they will consume more to assuage their wants, which are never sated. To consume more, they need to have more money, so they endure unsatisfying jobs, move to new locations to get ahead, and work long hours. What Sclove adds to the picture is the idea that capitalism, through the way it destroys community bonds and fosters a never-satisfied craving for more, undermines people's opportunities to achieve higher levels of psychological satisfaction.

This analysis may sound abstract, but Sclove makes the journey engaging, using several techniques. The connection with the *Mahabharata* provides continued illumination. Sclove develops his analysis step by step, carefully showing how things fit together. He provides diagrams and pictures, showing interactions between different components of his model, with feedback loops and visual portrayals of the search for transcendence, and how this search is derailed.

What about surveys showing that most people say they are happy? These don't seem to be compatible with Sclove's analysis of social and psychological dysfunctions. His assessment is that when answering survey questions about life satisfaction, it is the ego answering—and the ego is unaware of opportunities beyond its ken.

What to Do?

Sclove paints a gloomy picture of the contemporary human condition. As he writes, "modernity is unique in binding vast masses of people into a psychological configuration that is abnormally insecure, lacking, pathology-prone, dis-integrated, stunted, and self-deceiving ..." (191). But there are ways to counter and overcome this binding process. They can be summarised under the general idea of building egalitarian communities. Sclove delves into various alternatives along these lines. Section headings give a sense of what's involved: reviving local community life, integrative practices, relocating infrastructures, limiting hierarchy and social stratification, and cosmopolitan localism. The basic theme is to restrain individualistic, self-seeking, acquisitive and power-hungry tendencies by building connections between people in cooperative, mutually supportive and satisfying relationships and activities.

For those who have been sympathetic to and involved in these sorts of alternatives, these ideas will be familiar. Indeed, Sclove gives example after example of initiatives that have been taken. His analysis points to a direction that has been pursued by many others, such as those who support worker cooperatives, deliberative democracy and local production. There is, though, one difference. Those involved in these sorts of alternatives may be motivated by egalitarian commitments but perhaps not by psychospiritual goals. Even so, one of the attractions of participatory activities is the greater feeling of purpose, solidarity and community that they provide, so maybe they are already achieving some of what Sclove is calling for.

One of the obstacles to moving in this direction is economic inequality, both a cause and consequence of capitalism and consumerism. Sclove offers a variety of remedies for inequality, including progressive taxes, legal backing for trade unions, limits on political donations, reform of corporate governance and stronger antitrust law. These are fine, but they are goals only, without an accompanying strategy to achieve them. Sclove's own analysis suggests the difficulties of bringing corporate and political elites under control. Why should they do anything to foster economic equality by helping people to live locally in sustainable ways in mutually supportive communities while reducing their consumption as part of a vision of simple living with greater spiritual satisfaction?

Perhaps overcoming economic inequality is not necessary for progress, because at all levels of the hierarchy people still have the capacity to join together in mutually satisfying and uplifting efforts. Those who do can learn from Sclove's analysis of the problem and vision of alternatives, even without a blueprint for change.

Escaping Maya's Palace is a worthy contribution. Pointing to a toxic feedback loop offers insight that can be used by those who seek to break the loop and build on Sclove's ideas to develop strategies. Also valuable is attention to what Sclove calls the taboo on taking seriously what can be learned from psychospiritual traditions and practices. For anyone who wants to undertake a journey to escape Maya's palace, to help build community life and solidarity, Sclove offers plenty of material for learning and inspiration. His book contains a vast number of references, discussed in numerous endnotes, that could be the reading list for someone embarking on a lifetime search. His analysis of the *Mahabharata* shows how it is possible to learn from the records of ancient wisdom. *Escaping Maya's Palace* is not the final word, but can be seen as part of the process.

References

- Frank, Robert H. 1999. *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess*. New York: Free Press.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2006. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. New York: Basic Books.
- Maslow, Abraham H. 1966. *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Roberts, Alan. 1979. *The Self-Managing Environment*. London: Allison & Busby.
- Scitovsky, Tibor. 1976. *The Joyless Economy: An Inquiry into Human Satisfaction and Consumer Dissatisfaction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sclove, Richard. 2022. *Escaping Maya's Palace: Decoding an Ancient Myth to Heal the Hidden Madness of Modern Civilization*. Boston: Karavelle Press.
- Sclove, Richard. 1995. *Democracy and Technology*. New York: Guilford Press.