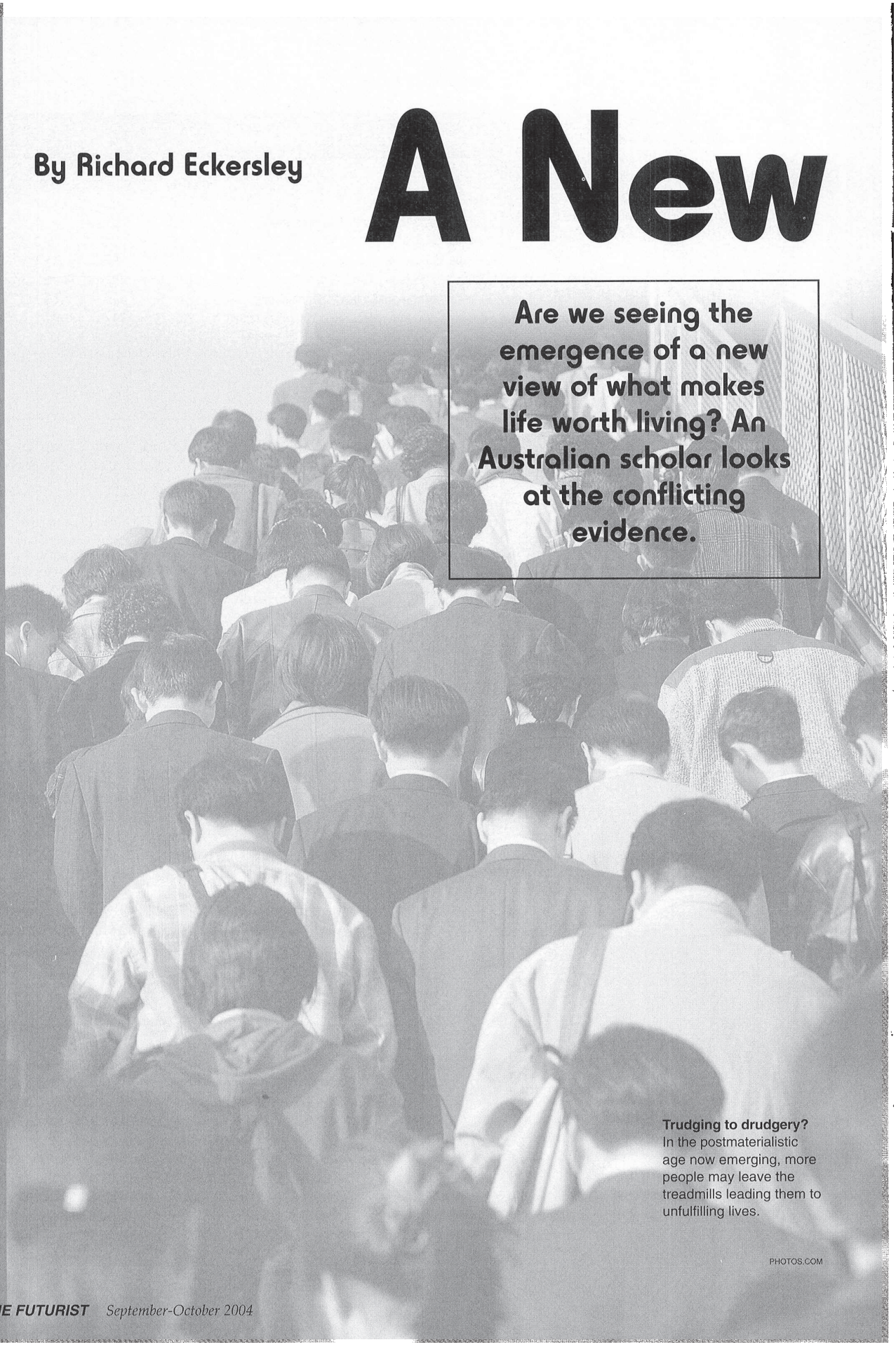
By Richard Eckersley

A New

Are we seeing the emergence of a new view of what makes life worth living? An Australian scholar looks at the conflicting evidence.



Trudging to drudgery? In the postmaterialistic age now emerging, more people may leave the treadmills leading them to unfulfilling lives.

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World View Struggles to Emerge

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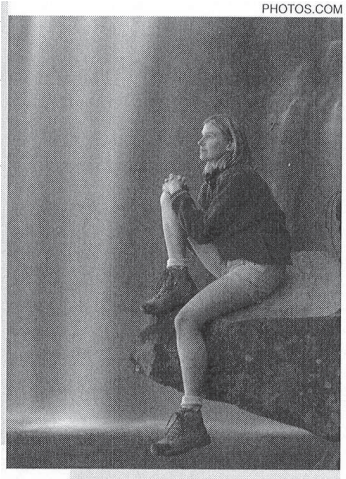

Many people are downshifting—cutting back on work to live healthier, seeking fulfillment, and leading less materialistic and more environmentally friendly lives.

While most people profess to being happy and satisfied with their own lives, many surveys reveal widespread public disquiet about the modern way of life. A frequent criticism of these studies is that they reflect what people *say*—and have probably always said—when it is what they *do* that provides a truer measure of social preferences. This claim is partially valid, but it overlooks two things: the cultural pressures that push people to behave in ways contrary to their beliefs and the growing evidence that a profound change is taking place, not just in attitudes, but in lifestyles.

Evidence of the moral tension in modern life is unequivocal, and evidence that people want to do, and are doing, something about it is growing. Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay, while noting the social dangers inherent in the process of detachment and disengagement evident in Australia (and elsewhere), says many people are exploring the meaning of their lives and connecting with their most deeply held values. The gap between "what I believe in" and "how I live" is uncomfortably wide for many of us, and we are looking for ways to narrow it, he says.

"We want to express our values more clearly and live in ways that make us feel better about ourselves," Mackay explains. Whether this search for meaning is expressed in religion, New Age mysticism, moral reflection, or love and friendship, the goal is the same: "to feel that our lives express who we are and that we are living in harmony with the values we claim to espouse."

Many Americans are upset about the direction of their lives, but find it difficult to imagine how their course could be altered, says one U.S. study, *Yearning for Balance*, by the Harwood Group. Yet the research identified a degree of consensus about the nature of the problem that Americans face—an essential ingredient for creating broadly supported, meaningful, and sustained change. "People from all walks of life share similar concerns about a culture of materialism and excess, and the consequences for future generations," according to the report. "Many are surprised and excited to find that others share their views." People associated the public discourse with acrimony, divisiveness, and gridlock; most did not want any part of it. "When they hear each other describe common concerns about misplaced values, children, and the environment, and have a chance to explain their longing for a more balanced life, a spark appears—people begin to imagine the possibility of change."

And this possibility of change is becoming a reality. Recent studies by U.S. researchers Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson reveal that a quarter of Americans are *cultural creatives*, people who have a made a comprehensive shift in their world view, values, and way of life. Surveys in European Union countries suggest there are at least as many cultural creatives there. As Ray and Anderson note, "They are disenchanted with 'owning more stuff,' materialism, greed, me-firstism, status display, glaring social inequalities of race and class, society's failure to

Studies show that people are working harder and earning more money, but remain frustrated and unhappy. The bar for middle-class aspirations—for feeling and demonstrating that you've made it—keeps getting raised, says Eckersley.

care adequately for elders, women and children, and the hedonism and cynicism that pass for realism in modern society." Instead, they are placing emphasis in their lives on relationships, communities, spirituality, nature and the environment, and real ecological sustainability.

Cultural creatives represent a coalescence of social movements that are concerned not just with influencing government, but also with reframing issues in a way that changes how people understand the world. Ray and Anderson say that in the 1960s less than 5% of the population was making these momentous changes. In little more than a generation, that proportion has grown to 26%. "That may not sound like much in this age of nanoseconds, but on the timescale of whole civilizations, where major developments are measured in centuries, it is shockingly quick."

The cultural-creatives trend is consistent with the observations of American sociologist Ronald Inglehart. Drawing on surveys of people in the United States and several European nations between 1970 and 2001, he found a pronounced shift from materialist to postmaterialist values. The trend is one aspect of a broader shift from modern to postmodern values taking place in advanced industrial societies. Postmaterialists are still interested in a high material standard of living, but they take it for granted and place increasing emphasis on the quality of life. "The economic outlook of modern industrial society emphasized economic growth and economic achievement above all," Inglehart says. "Postmodern values give priority to environmental protection and cultural issues, even when these goals conflict with maximizing economic growth."

While Australians haven't yet been measured for their cultural creativity, a 2003 study by the Australia Institute suggests the proportion of cultural creatives there is likely to be similar to that in the United States and Europe, perhaps even higher. It found that 23% of Australians aged 30–59 had downshifted in the past 10 years: that is, they voluntarily made a long-term change in their lifestyle that had resulted in their earning less money. Their ways of downshifting included cutting back work hours, taking lower-paying jobs, stopping work, and changing careers. The reasons were to spend more time with family, live healthier lifestyles, seek more balance or fulfillment, and lead a less materialistic and more environmentally friendly life.

While most downshifters cited personal reasons rather than articulating a postmaterialist ideology or philosophy as the most important factor, their individual choices, taken together, are still socially and politically significant. Not counted as downshifters were those people who retired, returned to study, set up their own business, or left work to have a child. If some of the excluded are included as legitimate downshifters, along with those who have opted for a cultural-creative lifestyle from the beginning, the proportion of Australians who are challenging the dominant culture of our times is likely to be substantially higher.

Luxury Fever

Still, these civilizational shifts are not necessarily straightforward and one-dimensional. We don't have a fixed quantum of social energy so that if pressure mounts in one area it must ease in another. Pressures can rise in several conflicting realms, increasing social tensions. More people are disenchanted with consumerism, yet we continue to consume more. Reflecting this values tension, economist Juliet Schor has identified a more virulent form of consumerism in the United States marked by competitive acquisition. In *The Overspent American* (Basic Books, 1998), she says large numbers of Americans spend more than they say they would like to, more than they realize they are spending, more than is fiscally prudent, and in ways that are collectively, if not individually, self-defeating.

A good example of competitive acquisition in Australia and elsewhere is the increasing size of new houses, even as the size of households shrinks. Growing numbers of people, often quite young and with children, are taking out huge mortgages to buy 400-square-meter "McMansions" in the outer suburbs of our large cities. The bar for middle-class aspirations—for feeling and demonstrating that you've made it—keeps getting raised.

Annual surveys of almost 250,000 new college students in the United States show that the proportion saying it was "very important or essential" that they become "very well off financially" rose from about 40% in the late 1960s to more than 70% in the 1990s, making it the top objective. At the same time, the proportion saying it was important to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" showed a corresponding decline from more than 80% to about 40%. The trend lines show the biggest changes between the late 1960s and late 1980s—crossing in the mid-1970s—and have remained fairly stable since then. Declines were also recorded in those people saying it was important to "keep up-to-date with politics," "be involved in environmental cleanup," and "participate in community action." As social psychologist Dave Myers says, "To young Americans of the 1990s, money matters." Or, as *Rolling Stone* magazine put it in 2001, today's hot strategy is "milking it": "The smart money is on getting it while you can, however you can, as fast as you can."

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In Australia, almost two-thirds (62%) of people surveyed in a 2002 Australia Institute study agreed they could not afford to buy everything they really need; this included almost half of the highest income group. More than half (56%) agreed they spent almost all of their money on the basic necessities of life—including more than a quarter of the highest income group. The author, Institute director Clive Hamilton, links the findings to a phenomenon of overconsumption that has been labeled *luxury fever* or *affluenza*. A substantial majority of Australians who experience no real hardship, and even live lives of abundance, believe that they are "doing it tough," he says.

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Stuff and more stuff. But does all our stuff make us any happier? Though disenchanted with consumerism, we continue to buy more, says Eckersley.

A 2002 survey for the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index presents a slightly different perspective. This survey found that Australians were, on average, 78% satisfied with their "ability to pay for household essentials." However, they averaged a relatively low 65% satisfaction with their "ability to afford the things you would like to have." They recorded an even lower score (59%) for their satisfaction with their "ability to save money." The results suggest that, despite growing wealth, most people feel they are only getting by; they can pay for essentials, but cannot afford to buy all that they'd like or to save. It appears people are caught between the desire to spend and the wish to put some money aside.

There are, then, paradoxes and contradictions in the evidence about social preferences and directions. These reflect the inevitable incompleteness of any study, a focus on only part of the story; they also reveal the very real ambivalence in people's minds and the state of flux in modern societies. All in all, most people may still be obeying the cultural imperative to consume, but growing numbers are opting out of a way of life they feel is becoming increasingly destructive to health and well-being, both personally and socially.

There are now more and more conversations taking place about our values. There are a thousand brushfires of revolution breaking out as more people reassess their priorities and explore different ways of thinking about and living their lives. What we are seeing are parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic struggle as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail and new ways of being human strive for definition and acceptance.

The New Moral Autonomy

Behind this development is the emergence of a new moral autonomy. We humans have the opportunity, however small, of becoming truly moral beings, perhaps for the first time in history. That is, each of us has the opportunity to exercise genuine moral choice and to take responsibility for the consequences of those choices, rather than accepting moral edicts based on some grand, universal creed and handed down from on high by its apostles.

The new moral freedom brings with it responsibility—and agony—as British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman points out. "The denizens of the postmodern era are, so to speak, forced to stand face-to-face with their moral autonomy, and so also with their moral responsibility," says Bauman. "This is the cause of moral agony. This is also the chance the moral selves never confronted before."

Moral autonomy seems close to what theologians call the doctrine of "primacy of conscience." It presents us with an immense challenge, and it may well be asking too much of us. But the ideal is there, if often hidden, in both religious teaching and science.

Argument and evidence for a new moral autonomy are also coming from other quarters. More writers are talking about the need for a new kind of socially expanded or responsible individualism. These new orientations create "something like a cooperative or altruistic individualism," say German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim in their book *Individualization* (Sage, 2002). "Thinking of oneself and living for others at the same time, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal, substantive connection. Living alone means living socially." American social scientist Alan Wolfe, in *Moral Freedom* (W.W. Norton, 2001), describes an unprecedented change that has swept America since the 1960s. People have begun to make moral decisions based on their own needs, rather than deferring to traditional religious and government sources of authority, he says.

Using in-depth interviews as well as a national poll of U.S. attitudes toward money, sex, work, morality, and God, Wolfe found that his respondents were generally morally moderate. Most no longer accepted traditional ideas about vice and virtue; they also avoided libertine lifestyles. People want to live a good life, he concluded, but insist on deciding for themselves what a good life is.

Moral philosopher Denis Kenny says in a 2001 article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that all moral orientations and theories spring from some cosmology or conception of the universe. When the cosmology of a society changes, so does its morality. But shards of older moral traditions can persist, even for centuries. For more than 100,000 years of human history, we in the West have inhabited four quite different universes, he says.

- **The enchanted universe:** a world alive with forces, powers, and influences, often personified as gods, which toyed with people's lives. This universe lives on in New Age beliefs.
- **The sacred universe:** the universe of Christianity, a world created by God. This is "the first comprehensive, fully integrated theory of everything in human experience."
- **The mechanical universe:** the

universe of Newtonian physics, embodying a world that runs like clockwork according to a set of physical laws.

• **The organic universe:** the universe of Einstein, relativity, and quantum physics. In this universe, a cosmic dance of energy takes place in which the distinction between the material and spiritual no longer makes much sense. Kenny calls this "the first universally valid and scientifically based cosmology in the history of human consciousness and culture."

Now we are on the threshold of a fifth cosmology, Kenny says: *the creative universe,* the universe as a self-organizing and creative process where "the human species is given the opportunity to take full control of our future." Rather than searching for meaning, we will create it by taking responsibility for the design of our personal, social, and planetary future. In this design, there is no fixed point to satisfy our longing for ultimate foundations, he says. Apart from outdated religious and philosophical traditions, the most formidable obstacle we face to the exercise of moral and political responsibility is "the imperial ambition of the global market" whose foundations and justification "lie in obsolete cosmology of the mechanical universe."

Kenny states that the paradoxical consequence of the great scientific enterprise of the past 500 years is not that we have finally uncovered the laws of being, "but that we have discovered a cosmic narrative that leaves us holding the baby of the evolutionary future."

> We are all now faced with a radical moral choice. We can step confidently into a new realm of creative freedom and take full, democratic responsibility for that future, or, alternatively, retreat into a blind and irresponsible dependence on moral authorities who . . . will confidently claim that they have a mandate from God, nature, history, or the market to define that future for us.

I am not sure—and not familiar enough with the relevant literature to decide—whether there is complete convergence on this question of moral autonomy, or whether it is all for the good, or even feasible. Wolfe says cryptically that the notion of moral freedom "is as inevitable as it is impossible." I don't believe that the freedom expressed in total postmodern relativism is personally and socially sustainable. We need some social moral framework within which to make choices. This may be, as Wolfe suggests, by way of wanting to hear "second opinions" as we make up our minds about various issues.

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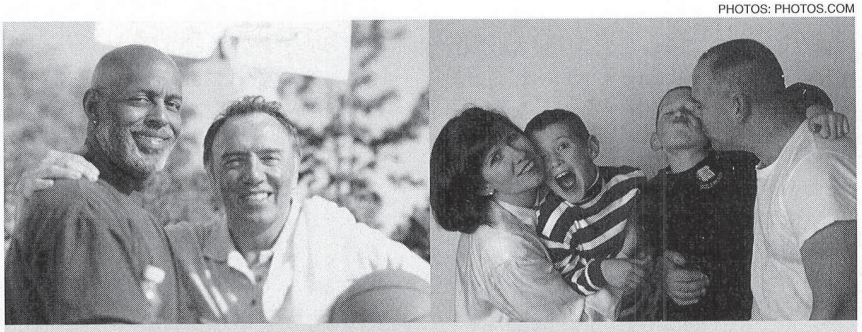

More people are finding happiness with family and friends, embracing community and relationship instead of physical possessions, according to author Richard Eckersley.

But, as the *Yearning for Balance* report and the other surveys on values also make clear, there is a tension or ambivalence being generated through recognizing people's right to make their own moral choices and the perceived need to change morally as a society. And the shift to moral independence has been associated with both a growing loss of faith and trust in social institutions and a withdrawal or disengagement from social and civic affairs, which hardly augurs well for governance.

Can we, then, develop a morality that is autonomous but also institutionalizes social responsibility and engagement? Perhaps we are seeing the center of moral gravity shift from social institutions to individuals. Rather than morality being imposed on us by our institutions through frameworks of regulation, we, through our personal choices, will imbue our social structures and cultures with moral content.

We need to work through these issues—and there is some evidence that we have begun. Both science and spiritual faith will play a part—not, as in the past, as institutions of moral authority, but as sources of knowledge and guidance.

History offers us hopeful stories that show that deep and positive change does happen. The historian W.H. McNeill says of life in Greece during the sixth century BCE that the measure of a good man and citizen became the modest life of an independent farmer, owning enough land to live decently, and ready to play his part manfully on the battlefield. He writes in *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Mentor, 1963), "As this ideal won increasing acceptance, the amassing of private wealth lost much of its attractiveness; and by the close of the century, even wealthy aristocrats had begun to live and dress simply. Competitive conspicuous consumption which had been characteristic of the nobility in the seventh century was directed into new channels, as men of wealth began to take pride in financing public buildings and services with a munificence they no longer dared or cared to lavish upon themselves."

A lively spirit of egalitarianism and civic solidarity began to distinguish the Greek way of life from that of other peoples, paving the way for the extraordinary surge in cultural development in the fifth century BCE. Might this also happen in the twenty-first century? □

About the Author
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