

Editor's note: This section contains reviews of books, whether brand new or classic, that we hope will be of interest to our readers.

Book Review

The Good Life: Aspiration, dignity, and the anthropology of wellbeing

**The Good Life: Aspiration, dignity,
and the anthropology of wellbeing**

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Language: English

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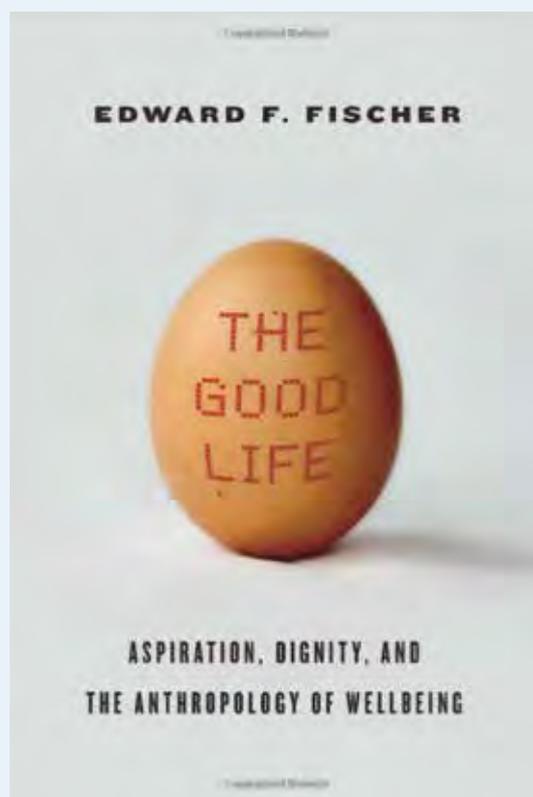
ISBN-13: 978-0804792530

It seems that everyone wants the good life. It is the title of a song by Sacha Distel and Jack Reardon made famous in a 1963 recording by Tony Bennett; of a 1970s BBC TV comedy series still watched by aficionados in boxed-set format today; of a 2014 book of photography by Jasper Morrison; of a book of philosophy by Hugh Mackay published in the same year; of a 2015 crime novel by Martina Cole; of a 2016 CD by jazz trumpeter Till Brönner; and of an annual Scottish “festival of music, food, books, ideas, craft, and the great outdoors, for the whole family” – to name but a few. Whatever it is, we certainly all want a piece of it.

Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA, Edward F Fischer found his inspiration for the present work in three “a-ha moments” – one in Germany, one in Guatemala and one in Washington DC – each of which demonstrated that the economic ambitions of individuals going about their daily work could be subordinated at will, and happily, to a higher moral purpose. It is this understanding of economic activity as a potentially moral realm, and

not a purely transactional one, that provides Fischer with his main angle of enquiry as he studies decision-making in Germany with respect to eggs and cars and in Guatemala with respect to coffee and broccoli.

Fischer commences with the proposition that “we should understand the ends of economics, as well as politics, to be provisioning the good life as widely as possible for people as they themselves conceive it.” He then draws a distinction between happiness and well-being, pointing out that happiness may be understood either as the ‘hedonic’ happiness of everyday contentment or else as life satisfaction in the broader sense, pointing out that this second meaning is more in line with the Aristotelian ideal of a fulfilled life, *eudaimonia*. It is in terms of this second definition that he analyses his subject, using his perspective as an American to highlight the peculiarities of the very divergent cultures of Germany and Guatemala



as they express themselves through people's day-to-day purchasing habits and work routines.

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“What price are we willing to pay to be virtuous?”

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Asking “What price are we willing to pay to be virtuous?”, Fischer opens his study with an examination of the moral choices at play when consumers purchase eggs in German supermarkets. He finds a remarkable degree of altruism in the decisions made. “Although rapidly changing, German political economic institutions of co-determination support a particular balance of individual self-interest and collective goods,” he observed. “Such stakeholding can be seen both in national policy and in consumer behavior. German consumers put a high value on the moral provenance of goods and how these contribute to the common good.” Fischer concludes that: “The system itself has the legitimacy to function to the extent that it constitutes a meaningful, moral project (often expressed as ‘solidarity’) for most people most of the time.”

Fischer goes on to argue that “a sense of control over one's own destiny” can provide the experience of “the good life” not only for citizens of a stable, tightly regulated and law-abiding

society such as Germany but also for the Maya coffee farmers of Guatemala, despite the economic inequalities and narco-violence that characterize contemporary existence in their country – a country to which numbers of enterprising Germans emigrated over a century ago to establish coffee farming businesses.

In a complex ethnographical study rich with local detail and intriguing insights, Fischer argues that agency and aspiration are the key drivers of well-being and the good life, assisted by health and physical security; material resources; opportunity structures; larger purposes and projects; family and social relations; and fairness and dignity.

“It takes more than income to produce well-being,” he concludes, “and policy makers would do well to consider the positive findings of anthropology and on-the-ground visions of the good life in working towards the ends for which we all labor.”

An excellent book to read over a cup of Guatemalan coffee, perhaps, with its famously complex and elusive aromatic structure.

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Book Review

Ever Seen a Fat Fox?

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Mike Gibney: Ever Seen a Fat Fox?

Human obesity explored

Paperback: 250 pages

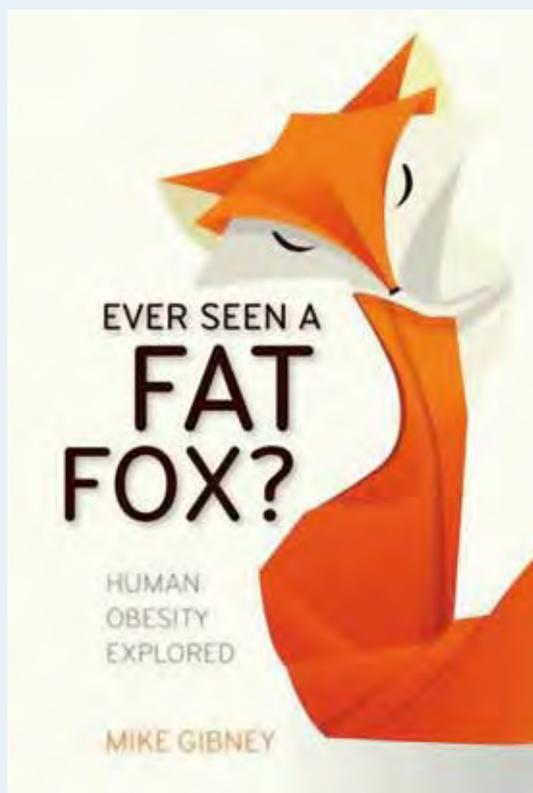
Publisher: University College Dublin Press (May 15, 2016)

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It is not usual for the titles of scholarly works on nutrition to end with a question mark. Nor is it usual for their wording to be based on a colloquial formulation. Nor again is it usual for their cover artwork to depict an animal. For all these reasons, Prof. Mike Gibney's *Ever Seen a Fat Fox?* challenges the reader before it is even opened. And the book's subtitle, *Human obesity explored*, is a further challenge. This work is an *exploration* of a problem, and very definitely not the blueprint for a solution.



The worlds of human nutrition and animal nutrition are traditionally kept firmly apart. There may be many excellent scientific, medical and cultural reasons for this, but the fact is – as Prof. Gibney points out in his preface – that we share much of our genetic make-up with animals. One might therefore expect much of human experience to be reflected in animal experience. This is the case with certain defining events such as birth and death, and likewise with certain defining experiences such as pain and hunger, but in the case of animals that live in the wild, at least, the parallel does not hold true with respect to the phenomenon of obesity. As Prof. Gibney explains: “Humans are the only species that get fat. We and the fox can develop many common cancers or diseases of the gut or heart. Each species can suffer parasitic, bacterial and viral infections. We each can injure a limb and suffer traumatic injuries. But foxes, like all feral animals, don’t develop lifelong obesity leading to major illnesses from diabetes to hypertension. Humans have a unique relationship with food that neither the fox nor any other species has.”

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 “We are fat because we organized society in such a way as to make that not simply possible but probable”

The nature of humans’ relationship with food over the centuries provides the guiding principle for Prof. Gibney’s exploration of the condition of obesity and possible approaches to tackle it. “It is to me blindingly obvious,” he writes, “that, notwithstanding the common sharing of most of our genomes with animals we are fat because we organized society in such a way as to make that not simply possible but probable.” Prof. Gibney’s core understanding of obesity, therefore, is that it is constructed by culture, and that, precisely because human culture is complex, the problem of obesity can only be tackled by a sophisticated combination of solutions supported by a significant financial investment. “No dough, no go!” as the penultimate line of the book puts it.

The tone of *Ever Seen a Fat Fox?* is by turns polemical and philosophical, pugilistic and practical. Prof Gibney takes issue with the widely-held tenet that “the modern epidemic of obesity started in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s in the US, and was quickly followed by similar growth surges in the prevalence of obese persons across the globe, which, to this day continues to rise almost everywhere.” While not completely debunking this view, Prof. Gibney finds much to criticize in it, including the application of false metrics and the stigmatization of individuals who are obese. His complicated and compassionate view is that “obesity is so complex from both a social and biological perspective that we will make slow progress in our understanding of bits and pieces of the biological jigsaw and even slower process in the social jigsaw. In the meantime we can wait and hope. Or we can recognize that obesity is simply a consequence of the way we live and we can seek to change our ways. It’s no easy road and that is the central tenet of this book: beware of self-serving advocates selling simple solutions.”

It is perhaps consoling to recollect that, ever since the time of its starring roles in *Aesop’s Fables* some 600 years BCE, the fox has been known for its intelligence, resilience and adaptability. Foxes have an almost unparalleled ability to look after their own interests. Perhaps we can indeed live in hope.

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