

*Humanism
and the Good Life*

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Yi-Fu Tuan. *The Good Life*. (Review)

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A BOOK of this sort is a rarity in today's world—an extended ramble (but more tightly constructed than a ramble) through the terrain of human experience, in the manner of a Montaigne, Addison, or Emerson.

Like these giants, Yi-Fu Tuan aspires to universality. It is remarkable that he manages to speak intelligently in such terms in an age when anyone knows (or should know) that, per anthropology, there is an astonishing variety to the human experience—so, too, in reference to world history, or any understanding of philosophy that includes the major world traditions. Yi-Fu Tuan is successful to the extent that he is because of his broad background in geography (a discipline that encompasses so many others) and because of his wideranging reading, particularly in anthropology, but also in history, philosophy, and architecture.

The Good Life refers to a wide range of human experiences, but to none of the author's. This reflects one of the major points he makes, that the good life involves a life of the mind that draws on the knowledge and experience of others (what Whitehead—whom the author does not cite—termed “knowledge by report”). Yi-Fu Tuan makes this one of his two main themes:

The good life cannot be confined to direct experience, which is too limiting. As a matter of fact, no human life is constituted solely of people, places, and events that he has personally witnessed or taken part in. Particularly in literate societies, a person's biography is as much what he has read, heard, and thought about as what he has done and where he has been. (p. 10)

His other main theme is that the good life implies choice and habit of reflection. His is a cerebral good life.

Yi-Fu Tuan is associated with “humanistic geography,” an approach to the field that stands in contrast with more positivistic ones. It emphasizes the ambiguity and complexity of relations between people and place. So, too, this book.

Apart from introductory and concluding chapters, *The Good Life* consists of seven chapters: Individual Experiences, Cultural Models (in two parts, with the subdivision, Eden, Farm Life, Pastoral Nomadism, Hunters and Warriors; and Comfort vs. Spendor, Bourgeois Interior, and City), Stability and Continuity, Growth and Progress, Austerity and Truth, and Old Age and the Good Life.

The author writes in an attractive English prose. Scattered through the work are a number of *obiter dicta*:

The ability to act effectively makes for the good life, . . . (p. 23)

Comfort and splendor are incompatible. (p. 53)

What is magical is unnatural. The city is magical in its successful defiance of nature’s rhythms. (p. 71)

A mature and responsible individual is one who makes all sorts of plans. (p. 152)

[A] world imaginatively appropriated can seem more real than the one with which our senses are directly engaged.” (p. 160)

Yi-Fu Tuan is one of few authors who can use the generic “she” well. (His use of “humankind,” however, sounds unnatural.) The book’s readability is one of its strong suits.

The author avoids romanticizing certain approaches to life. Two interesting passages reflective of his wide reading are ones that, respectively, speak of the ritualized violence between young townsmen of neighboring districts in eighteenth-century France, and tell of the neglect that the elderly received from their extended families in early twentieth-century England.

My own impression of the book is that it is curiously reminiscent of Lin Yutang’s writing. This may be because *The Good Life*, like most of Lin Yutang’s works, consists of humane, interesting, sometimes wise essays. Lin Yutang is more personal in tone; Yi-Fu Tuan, coming decades later, is more up-to-date in his readings and better-read in “worldwide” and academic terms than Lin Yutang (although the latter wore his considerable learning, especially about China, quite lightly). Both are pleasant to read, offer intelligent fare for reflection, and seem so “humane”—which is clearly part of the point.

Bibliography

Yi-Fu Tuan. *The Good Life*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986. viii, 191 pp.