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# On the concept of good with continual reference to economy. What is the axiological background of collaborative consumption society?

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**Abstract:** The rationale for choosing the object of research is the recognition of the socio-cultural validity of new ways of management (New Economy), interpreted as a response to the exhaustion of traditional ways in which societies function, i.e. those based on ideas of growth and ownership. The aim of the article is to analyse selected examples of redefinition of the concept of good in the context of new social narratives and the grounding of certain beliefs related to the idea of degrowth and sharing economy. The article is theoretical and references to contemporary research on cultural philosophy and social analyses of economic practice. A socio-regulatory concept of culture was adopted as a research perspective, and humanistic interpretation was used as an explanatory procedure. Qualitative data was analysed using atlas.ti, concept driven coding was used, and content analysis was limited to concept analysis and the creation of conceptual maps. The research results are supposed to show: 1) the impact of modern forms of economic practices using the Internet and IT technology on the redefinition of good, 2) how this redefinition builds the axiological background of society of collaborative consumption.

**Keywords:** values, good, culture, degrowth, sharing economy.

## Introduction

The title is a paraphrase of the title of Kierkegaard's book on irony (*On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*). In the same way as Kierkegaard takes Socrates as the starting point for his considerations, I base my analysis of the contemporary redefinition of good on "continual reference" to the New Economy (Xie & Zhang, 2021). I am looking at selected aspects of the economic practice of Euro-Atlantic societies in an attempt to find the contextual sources for the redefinition of the concept of good as a world-view background for collaborative consumption society. Contemporary practices of economic exchange based on easy technology-enabled access to goods and services (for example ordering a ride at the click of a button) have changed how we define

processes, relationships and business partnerships. How has this change been reflected in axiology? Do contemporary societies, with their labile world views, politics and economy, existing in a limbo-like state, waiting for new crises to strike, undertake actions whose primary sense is good, understood as a form of defense against socially problematic challenges?

My attempt at the reflections on the axiological context of contemporary economic practices is motivated by the fact that the axiological vision of “blood-thirsty” capitalism, driven by competition, profit, growth and consumption, can no longer be upheld (Antinyan et al., 2020). The crisis of the existing axiological approaches is believed to be manifesting as polarisation of societies, inequalities, social exclusion, climate and economic disasters as well as legislative difficulties. The neoliberal capitalistic vision of the world can no longer serve as a meaning-making world view, which imposes sense on actions taken by people in different sectors of social practice (not only in economic practices, but also in the area of customs, research or art) (Zboroń, 2015). The main research objective of the article is to identify the impact of selected economic practices on new ways of conceptualisation of good and to show how such conceptualisation is gaining ground as an axiological basis in a specific sector of social practice, i.e. economic practice. Do contemporary business models, which take the post-crisis conceptualisation of good (based on the feeling of community, degrowth, justice) as their axiological basis, actually contribute to the social grounding of this conceptualisation of good? Or perhaps we may be witnessing the opposite trend involving a cynical business game between individual points in the flow (of goods, services, information) within a network, a game which not only does not sustain the new conceptualisation of good, but even makes it weaker?

## **1. Literature review: The cultural background of collaborative consumption society**

The cultural background of the emergence and functioning of collaborative consumption society may be seen in terms of three types of epoché—the suspension of the current ways of describing the world and the values which underlie those descriptions. More and more often some of the beliefs which have so far regulated human activity are becoming “exhausted”—and as such they are subject to suspension, epoché, bracketing. These beliefs are respected only in declarations, i.e. people still declare them to be important and valid, while in actual fact (in action) these beliefs no longer guide human actions. Epoché of current beliefs may be categorised in three distinct types in terms of custom, cognition and language.

In the first epoché, the suspension applies to beliefs which have so far been used to give meaning to actions taken in the context of customs, shared social

reactions to specific events, time or place. In sociology, custom and habit are differentiated according to the commonness criterion. If a certain behaviour is typical of an individual, the term *habit* is used (e.g. having a cup of coffee first thing in the morning). If a similar behaviour is exhibited by large numbers of people, we call it a custom (e.g. decorating a Christmas tree) (Giddens & Suttan, 2021). The analysis of the world-view sources of custom practices of post-modern societies usually starts with the concept of consumption and the associated experiences (Shoham & Gavish, 2017). At the same time, this type of epoché seems to have two “faces” when analysed in the context of the concept of consumption: origins (what type of need is addressed: obligation or pleasure) and time (time when a need is addressed: tomorrow or today).

So far the beliefs which add meaning to custom-related consumption have relied mainly on the idea of duty and obligation (I decorate a Christmas tree because one should do so to create Christmas spirit, I cook twelve Christmas Eve dishes, because this is how we should celebrate the time of waiting for Christmas; I put up a flag on a specific day, because this is my patriotic obligation). Such beliefs continue to be referenced (also in advertising) quite often (Shareef et al., 2018). However, researchers also identified another type of value-assignment in consumption and consumer behaviour (actions and reactions) based on bliss, luxury and pleasure (I decorate the Christmas tree and my house with lights because flickering lights attract attention, the twinkle is pleasant to look at; I wear national colours when I go to a football match, because it looks *cool* in the stands) (Christodoulides et al., 2021). This type of value assignment is more and more often used in practice and in a way suspends the power of obligation-based beliefs, irrespective of whether they have religious or more traditional (from the philosophical perspective—e.g. Kantian ethics of duty) grounding.

The conceptual source of a new understanding of the world-view roots of actions of members of contemporary (post-modern) societies can be traced back to Roland Barthes’ (1997) reflections on the *jouissance* and *plaisir* of a text. Both the ecstatic, individualistic bliss, and the experienceable culturally generated pleasure are two types of “concepts which describe the reader’s feelings when interacting with a text” (Mamzer, 2005, p. 28). They both refer to a specific reception, grounded not so much in the text itself but in the relation between the recipient and the text. This relationality can have a variety of interpretations: psychoanalytical, physical, social and religious (Mamzer, 2005). However, irrespective of the interpretation, the essence always lies in placing the focus on experience and feelings, and it is this aspect which seems to be prevalent today in the context of understanding beliefs which guide contemporary societies when they engage in similar actions as part of a custom. Nowadays, duty culture is transforming into pleasure culture, “we are witnessing a decrease in the authoritarian nature of obligation” (Golka, 2005), while at the same time the right to “seek pleasure and entertainment” is gaining ground.

The transformation of the custom system (in the meaning adopted here: a specific belief reality behind actions taken as part of a custom) of post-modern societies is also linked with the suspension of the power of the “deferment principle” (postponing happiness, joy, putting aside money) and an increasing prevalence of beliefs in the “here and now” gratification. This could be concisely called a transition from the savings book society to the credit card society. We are living on “borrowed time”, getting used to the life of a debtor living in the moment, not thinking that the good “now” will have to be paid for with a difficult “tomorrow” (Bauman, 2010). The spread of such beliefs has had a strong impact on the formation of collaborative consumption society and the redefinition of good as a value regulating economic practice.

The cognitive epoché of collaborative consumption society applies to a change in the transfer of cultural content and the type of sensitivity of recipients. Electronic communication media have changed the world not only in terms of the flow of content, services, communication, interaction, but also in terms of how reality is perceived, explored, constructed or how we come to know it (Glava & Baciu, 2015). Societies whose culture was previously based on words have turned to picture-based culture, where we are constantly bombarded (not only as consumers) with icons and pictograms (Burszta & Kuligowski, 1999). Quite often this is linked to the need for instant communication of specific content (as is the case with road signs), yet the suspension of *logos* as a way to understand reality brings about serious consequences in how individuals participate in culture or social life. In the word-based culture reality was approached with analytical, logical, rational thinking, with an emphasis on looking for arguments which will have the power (based on the best, most often scientific, description) to persuade others. The picture-based culture appeals to other modes of reception: emotionality, symbolism, brevity. The fact that even in traditional reason-based discourses of knowledge or information sharing (school education, academic and political debates) images are becoming more important than content and play, and games and emotions take priority over rational critique, is a powerful demonstration how much we respect the belief that this emotion and image driven way of cognising the world is the most effective way of learning about reality (Jääskä & Aaltonen, 2022).

In terms of the last type of epoché, the one related to language, we can distinguish between the traditional way of human communication on the one hand (Postman, 2002), based on the idea of agreement and orientation to the truth (where truth may be understood from its Aristotelian/”common-sense” perspective—as consistency of thoughts/judgment with reality, or from the coherence perspective—as a coherent system, or from the consensual perspective—as an agreement), and on the other hand, communication built on dissonance, incoherence, meaning reversal, communication which gives rise to multiple meanings, oriented towards quasi-truth, post-truth, discord, where irony, sarcasm, paradox or lie are an end in itself in the process of communi-

cation (Rorty, 1989). The language epoché of collaborative consumption society today is often a transition from the *bona fide* (in good faith) communication mode to the *non bona fide* (not in good faith) communication mode.

Sharing economy is generally understood as a new type of human business practice, undertaken also outside the professional realms, which may be an answer of the contemporary generation to social crises, an answer which current business models failed to provide (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Some researchers see this new form of economic practice as a contemporary way of constructing public sphere values (in 4 dimensions: professionalism, efficiency, services, engagement) (Hofmann et al., 2019). When reconstructing the axiological dimension of sharing economy we can point to degrowth economy as its worldview background. From the cultural perspective, the concept of degrowth, first introduced by Jacques Ellul and popularised by Serge Latouche, may be understood as a change in economic values, a process where “the consumption focused on owning and flouting material goods” is replaced with “value-senses such as: creating social relations, solidarity, compassion” (Pogonowska, 2018). Sharing economy is intended to be built on the concept of degrowth, and actions taken within this practice are to be driven by other values than profit.

## 2. Methodology

The methodological framework for the study is based on a cultural perspective where culture is understood as a thought reality which regulates—at a supra-individual, social level—human behaviour, actions and activities (Banaszak, Kmita, 1994). This thought reality is made up of two types of beliefs: normative and directive. The former ones make values the objectives of our actions, so values become the sense of our activities—an individual takes an action in the hope that the action will generate or embody a specific value. Directive beliefs, in turn, apply to ways of pursuing the value set by normative beliefs. In the cultural perspective, values are seen as a signpost for human activity, being both a product and a regulator of human activity. In this approach values are not seen as absolute, they change throughout history and are subject to temporal and situational contexts, as well as cultural relativisation.

The rationale for choosing this research perspective is its usefulness in the axiological analysis of actions taken by users of new economy networks. The reconstruction of beliefs on sharing as a new economic practice may help to identify the values making up the axiological basis referenced by representatives of sharing economy. Humanistic interpretation (Kmita, 1973) is used as an explanatory procedure to perform an analysis of concepts and lists of values. The interpretation involves the construction of a response which will give the reason (sense) for taking a given action by an individual. Such explanation is underpinned by an assumption that the subject is rational (an individual

acts rationally). The first stage of humanistic interpretation is a description of knowledge, or beliefs guiding an individual when taking specific actions. The second stage involves using this information to reconstruct the individual's value system/hierarchy, which provided an axiological background for actions. Actions are functionally grounded in a lasting specific global state accompanying a given situation and providing a cultural context. Consequently, in my reconstruction of beliefs I am also going to rely on specific economic phenomena or processes occurring in contemporary collaborative consumption societies.

The analysis of the axiological aspect of applications, considered to be representative of sharing economy, was based on naturally occurring data, such as data published by individuals as their description of a company (white papers) as well as available social media posts/videos (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter). This study was conducted in May 2021 and examined 21 profiles (white papers and social media posts) of companies declaring themselves as actors in the sharing economy. Examples were selected according to their belonging to the forms of consumption (clotheswap & toyswap; couchsurfing; crowdfunding; carpooling), distinguished by Ziobrowska (2017). I used a computer program called Atlas.ti to analyse qualitative data. In line with Gibb's findings (2008), I used concept driven coding. Consequently, to identify individual axiological "dimensions" I used the conceptual framework of white papers. The conceptual framework was used to identify extracts from descriptions of a given business entity which expressed, on the theoretical level, the same idea, the same reference to a value. The narrative analysis was based on two methods of qualitative data analysis: content analysis (limited to the analysis of concepts) and concept mapping. In this way specific axiological aspects could be assigned to individual business entities.

### **3. Findings: Axiology of collaborative consumption society**

#### **3.1. Shared good vs. ownership (owning and using)**

The starting point for the reconstruction of beliefs making up the axiological background of collaborative consumption society should be the observation how the concept of good is currently being redefined and how the idea of shared ownership is spreading. For a long time ownership has been a key concept in business practice and economic thought: a concept which underlay the organisation of the practice and description of economic exchange, labour and social relations (Lai et al., 2022). Ownership was defined as a right to have, enjoy, use, derive profit from, process or destroy an object; in practice such an approach gave rise to a specific type of business activity where the ownership of an item was a prerequisite of using it. As new business practices have spread, the ideological link between owning and using has lost its power, and more and more



parties to business exchanges have started acting in line with a belief that one can use a thing without needing to own it (Mai & Ketron, 2022). What was noticed was that some types of ownership are not seen as being marketable, which means that they are not perceived as something that can make money or something that can be owned and—consequently—“something should be done about it”. The spread of such beliefs has contributed to the emergence of prosumption on global markets, i.e. a new type of owning and using (producing and consuming) where individuals or communities are both producers and consumers of goods and services (Baruk, 2019).

The strengthening of beliefs that owning and using are not inextricably intertwined is functionally grounded in phenomena and processes which have created a specific context for business practice. One of them is technological support for sharing; contemporary societies have been “equipped” with efficient and effective global tools (platforms or applications) which enable widespread sharing of objects (goods, services, skills) with others. Today we no longer need to be socially and geographically close to the owner of an object or idea to be able to use it and share it (Poretski et al., 2021).

Another important phenomenon contributing to the cultural context of sharing economy is the emergence of new consumer attitudes (Das et al., 2009; Debevec et al., 2013). Social and economic crises at the beginning of the 21st century significantly increased consumer awareness and have made the ethical dimension of consumer choices much more prevalent. The choices are no longer an abstract concept discussed by the ivory tower of academia, but they actually “operate” in the process of consumption. A savvy consumer wants to take responsibility, to know the origin of goods, course of production, context, parties, exchange in order to be able to evaluate not so much the economic, but the moral value of an item and make a choice based on this information. New consumers are also believed to be in favour of the circular economy understood in opposition to the linear economy (profit- and progress-driven) (Su & Urban, 2021). The new consumer is supposed to act taking into account social responsibility (accommodating all stakeholders), sustainable development (the good of the planet) and future-oriented thinking (the wellbeing of future generations) (Francis & Sarangi, 2022).

The socio-cultural model of participation in social life has also evolved—what counts now is comfort, trust, belonging and interaction. The open system of social stratification and the “you can be whoever you want to be” principle translate, on the one hand, into availability and freedom of choice, but on the other hand, impose the terror of self-creation, the development of “reflexive forms of self-narration” (Giddens, 2006), when the choice of a specific lifestyle becomes a way of self-creation.

All the above phenomena create a specific context in which the beliefs providing the world-view background of business practices of collaborative consumption society can spread. Normative beliefs (NB) point to “good” as the

primary value to be pursued. In the context of consumption, this good is understood in two ways: as the good of an individual and the good of a community. Linguistically, this distinction could be reflected in contexts of meaning activated for the words *wealth* and *welfare*. The use of these terms (understood from the late Wittgensteinian perspective, 2009) involves two types of word-play: *wealth* is used mainly in the context of owning, while *welfare* (*sharing*) in the context of using. This difference in understanding gives rise to differences in directive beliefs (DB), resulting in opposing business practices/models.

In the first approach (NB 1: good as wealth), good is defined in relation to an individual; this is individualistic consumption. Directive beliefs, which specify how to pursue the value understood in this way, may be reconstructed as follows: DB 1.1: To achieve wealth we must consume here and now.

DB 1.2: To achieve wealth we must create short-run terms of exchange.

DB 1.3: To achieve wealth we must create objects (products, services) in a way that is accessible and cheap.

Such a redefinition of good is gaining ground in societies through the narration of profit: all business activity must be geared towards maximum financial results, and the revenue is the key to all sorts of statements and breakdowns (financial, insurance, corporate social responsibility) for business activity.

In the second approach (NB 2: good as welfare, sharing), good applies to the community of consumption, based on shared use and sharing, and is described by the following directive beliefs:

DB 2.1: To achieve welfare we need to consume with the future in mind (leave something for the future).

DB 2.2: To achieve welfare we need to adopt a long-term timeframe for the terms of economic exchange.

DB 2.3: To achieve welfare we need to create things based on cooperation and social justice.

In business practice, the model where the latter normative and declarative beliefs are embraced by consumers includes activities described as sharing economy. The overarching question of the text, as is stated above, is whether such a conceptualisation of good (based on the ideas of community and justice) is really becoming socially grounded and is respected in the practice of sharing economy. To answer the question, I performed qualitative analysis of white papers and social media posts/videos published by the most popular sharing economy platforms and applications.

### **3.2. Business vs. world-view model of sharing economy**

The analysis of the most popular platforms and applications categorised as sharing economy businesses (21 entities, including such giants as Uber, Lift, Airbnb, HomeAway, TaskRabbit, freelancer) revealed an axiological rift within the business practice, as is evident in the examples. In some cases, sharing economy

seems to be more than just a declaration, and the underlying idea of degrowth is also applied in the organisation, flow, access, relations and exchange, while in others, only some forms of sharing economy are adopted (access, ease of joining). The latter seem to be just a new method of attracting customers. The analysis of the axiological basis (understood here as a vision of the worldview reconstructed on the basis of white papers and the adopted system of values) of sharing economy businesses revealed two faces of sharing economy (sharing economy as a business model and as a world-view model) (Table 1).

**Table 1. Business vs. world-view model of sharing economy**

	<b>Sharing economy as a business model</b>	<b>Sharing economy as a world-view model</b>
Underlying idea	growth	degrowth
Objective	profit	other values: authenticity, transparency, not wasting, social bonds, cooperation, trust
Organisation of activities	control and hierarchy	peer-to-peer
Narrative used	emotions, social responsibility, inclusion of excluded groups, sustainable development, no/zero waste, ecology	rationality, figures, effectiveness, profitability, no/zero waste, ecology
Belonging based on	low prices/costs	identification
Examples	Uber, Airbnb	Lyft, NearDesk

Source: The author's own analysis.

A closer analysis of axiological dimensions of individual sharing economy entities demonstrated that in terms of values in a large number of cases we deal with different types of business practice which reinforce different understandings of shared good. In the business model, the redefinition of good as wealth is gaining ground, while in the world-view model the good is seen as welfare. For many businesses (be it business organizations or entities using/offering products and services) sharing economy operates only as a mode of doing business. Descriptions are full of emotions, “lofty” references to the philosophy of sustainable development (taking account of economic, social and ecological responsibility), yet when the values underlying the practices are reconstructed, quite often they prove to be just a form of PR, a way to build an image of a sharing economy business/app/platform. Businesses/users are supposed to be attracted by ease of access and related cheapness. In the pertinent literature there have been attempts for some time at separating the aspect of

easy access and cheapness afforded by the use of technology and building an exchange of goods on the basis of decentralised networks of trust and open access (Marchewka-Bartkowiak & Nowak, 2020). The term which captures this distinction in the meaning and which seems to be more and more often replacing the expression *sharing economy* is *access economy* (Jung, 2017). Broader terms, such as *on demand economy*, have also been used.

Humanistic interpretation, which focuses on explaining the meaning of actions in business exchange, is an effective way to establish whether for a given entity sharing economy is a business model or a world-view model. The reconstruction of the knowledge and value system underlying actions helps to reconstruct the value-assigning vision of the world, the vision which organises those actions. At the same time such reconstruction helps to show if the power of specific values is becoming weaker or stronger.

## Conclusions

New ways of understanding the concept of good adopted in modern business practices are implemented as two separate models (business model vs. world-view model). In the axiology of the New Economy, sharing economy is currently a battlefield where two different redefinitions of good are “fighting” for dominance. The cultural background of the battle encompasses mainly technological changes in contemporary societies and the resulting acceptance for beliefs concerning pleasure, time and self-creation. Contemporary business models built on the post-crisis understanding of good as welfare (based on the ideas of community, degrowth, justice) can contribute to the social grounding of these values only when these values are actually adhered to, when businesses let these values guide their actions.

The axiological analysis of applications listed as representative of sharing economy shows that quite often the understanding of good as the community of consumption, focused on degrowth and the future generations and awareness of limited resources, is not becoming more widespread. Quite the contrary, it is becoming weaker. Moreover, the analysis also reveals that sharing economy, which grew out of the opposition against the consumption “drive” and the narration of profit, in a way substantiates the need to possess and the idea of growth to which it stands in opposition. This is because it offers a “humanised” path for the current growth-based beliefs. If this is actually the case, sharing economy may face a similar fate as the idea of stakeholders in the area of CSR, i.e. it will be treated as a convenient, easy to implement (as easy as a separate report drafted by corporate CSR specialists) way to counter any allegations that a business is not ethical. However, if ethical dilemmas surrounding sharing economy as a business model (e.g. criticism of Uber as a mobile application in the context of driver licensing, fair competition, taxa-

tion, safety, responsibility) continue to be discussed and present in the media, this also means that the counter-model will become more and more widespread. Zygmunt Bauman (1994) wrote that “Like vampires, values need life to replenish their life juices”; thus, the more “blood” of debate, embodiment, respecting a given value system, or a specific redefinition of good, the stronger the good/values themselves.

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