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Why we have endless wishes for economic development while the Earth's resources are finite?

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While staying home last few months, I am writing a book to give a message to the next generation based on my own experience as a government official and an NPO founder. In this book, I would like to discuss why humans want continued economic development despite the limitation of the natural resources of the Earth. There would be a variety of reasons, but I would like to focus on capitalism, technology, and human desire because they have promoted development, expanding economic activities, increasing environmental burdens, and consequently brought about the environmental devastation of the Earth, the basis of all lives.

Then, why does capitalism seek expansion/development? Why does the technology continue evolving/expanding? Why have we lost a stopper for human desire?

1. Capitalism aims for expansion/development

The global environmental issues started in the 1970s when the Spaceship Earth reached its full capacity. But why does capitalism provoke economic expansion? Prof. Keishi Saeki of Kyoto University explains this phenomenon in his book of 2017. "Capitalism is an activity to continue economic expansion into the future. For that purpose, a company needs capital, so they borrow money from others. Their future earnings are used to pay back the debt. When profits are expected, they keep on borrowing money with interests. This way, business expands powered by borrowing money/debt, which is the nature of capitalism."

Furthermore, economic development became the barometer of economic policies of countries all over the world. On this point, Prof. Saeki wrote that "then, economic development has become the most easy-to-understand barometer of social development. If one can believe without question that having more wealth is better than having less wealth, there is every reason to recognize economic

development as an 'evolution', and people agreed on this point."

Today, capitalism is critically revisited in various aspects, seeking for improvement of capitalism. Some discussed new capitalism focusing on stakeholders' benefits, not share-holders. Others name improved capitalism "capitalism for public interests" or "advanced capitalism", etc. However, the basic nature of capitalism (expansion/development) is still there. When the Earth's overshoot today is evident, it is time to reconsider capitalism which induces global environmental devastation.

2. Evolution/development is the nature of technology

The main pillar of today's capitalism is technological innovation. Great philosophers and scientists warned earlier that the very nature of technology is expansion/development.

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher wrote in his book "Small is beautiful" as follows. "Strange to say, technology, although of course the product of man, tends to develop by its own laws and principles, and these are very different from those of human nature or of living nature in general. Nature always, so to speak, knows where and when to stop. Greater even than the mystery of natural growth is the mystery of the natural cessation of growth. There is measure in all natural things -- in their size, speed, or violence. As a result, the system of nature, of which man is a part, tends to be self-balancing, self-adjusting, self-cleansing. Not so with technology, or perhaps I should say: not so with man dominated by technology and specialisation. Technology recognises no self-limiting principle -- in terms, for instance, of size, speed, or violence. It therefore does not possess the virtues of being self-balancing, self-adjusting, and self-cleansing. In the subtle system of nature, technology, and in particular the super-technology of the modern world, acts like a foreign body, and there are now numerous signs of rejection." (E. F. Schumacher, [*Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*](#), 1973.)

Prof. Atsunobu Ichikawa, who taught at the Tokyo Institute of Technology and later served as President of the National Institute of Environmental Studies (NIES), wrote about civilization backed by technologies in his book of 1998. "There is no specific goal for the ecosystem but evolutionary processes. This applies

to technology-based civilization, another evolutionary system. It just expands and develops. This means technologies will expand and develop just for themselves regardless of the thought that generated those technologies. In this civilization, expansion means a stable trajectory and contraction is unstable. Even if we all agree to follow a contractive trajectory, just a little deviation leads us back to an expansionary trend. Technology-based civilization continues expanding without thought. We have to have a basic understanding of the nature of this civilization when we wish to harmonize technology with global environmental conservation."

As Prof. Ichikawa argues, the technology-based civilization does not allow self-control. It evolves and expands by itself without regard to the thought that created the technology. Since the expansionary trend is the nature of technology, we should devise a system to control technological development from the environmental viewpoint.

3. Endless human desire

Human desire is not at all a bad thing, but inexhaustible greed will lead us to a ruin. It was typically observed in the environmental destruction in the 20th century which was caused by the ever-expanding human desire for richness.

How to control human desire has been a serious issue from the old days. Before the modern age, religion, penalty, traditional wisdom (learn to be satisfied with the given conditions), and a community ordinance or family rules played the role of a controller of human desire.

Of the three pillars of environmental ethics (circulation, coexistence, restraint) that I have been advocating, I regard "restraint" as most important. Of course, some do not want restraint as they consider it represses freedom.

But I encountered a nice essay by Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1970 Nobel laureate in literature) which appeared in a Japanese newspaper in March 2000. "Ever worsening environmental destruction will deform climate zones. It may cause water shortage or land scarcity in those areas where people used to enjoy plenty of freshwater and extensive farmland. This may trigger conflicts among people. Conflicts for survival. To avoid such conflicts, we need to control our desire. Unfortunately, we lost the golden key of self-restriction in the deep sea long ago,

both in public and private lives, and now it is difficult for us to sacrifice our own life and become unselfish. However, humans enjoying freedom should make every effort to control their own desire. It is at the same time the surest way to liberate themselves.”

I totally agree with him. Humans are standing on the edge of a precipice. We are in pressing need of retrieving the golden key from the seabed.