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ARTICLES

The Virtue of Simplicity

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Abstract In this paper we explore material simplicity, defined as the virtue disposing us to act appropriately within the sphere of our consumer decisions. Simplicity is a conscientious and restrained attitude toward material goods that typically includes (1) decreased consumption and (2) a more conscious consumption; hence (3) greater deliberation regarding our consumer decisions; (4) a more focused life in general; and (5) a greater and more nuanced appreciation for other things besides material goods, and also for (6) material goods themselves. It is to be distinguished from simple-mindedness, a return to nature, or poverty. Simplicity overlaps with traditional virtues such as temperance, frugality, and wisdom, and sustains and enables traditional virtues such as justice and generosity. Simplicity is a virtue because it furthers human flourishing, both individual and social, and sustains nature's ecological flourishing. For analytic purposes, we consider six areas in which simplicity can make important contributions: (1) basic individual flourishing, (2) basic societal flourishing, (3) individual freedom or autonomy, (4) the acquisition of knowledge, (5) living meaningfully, and (6) preserving and protecting nonhuman beings. The proven failure of materialism to secure subjective happiness or objective flourishing argues for the practice of voluntary simplicity and for the radical reform of modern consumer societies.

Keywords Simplicity · Consumption · Temperance · Virtue

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Introduction

A young folklorist, collecting songs and stories in a remote corner of the southern Appalachians, kept hearing that an old mountain farmer was the keeper of many traditional tales and ballads. Intrigued, he made his way high up into the hills to the man's simple home. After their introduction, the farmer began to sing ballad after ballad and tell tale after tale. From time to time, neighbors, particularly children, would drop by to enjoy his stories.

While the old farmer was singing one of his last songs for the evening, the folklorist noticed a gold rock resting on the front porch where they were sitting. He couldn't help but stare; it was the biggest piece of gold he had ever seen! The farmer noticed this, and when he finished his last song he told the folklorist that he was more than welcome to the shiny rock he had placed on the edge of his porch. The folklorist couldn't believe his ears! After confirming that the farmer was serious, the young folklorist took the gold rock down the mountain to the town where he was staying.

All that evening and through most of the night, he thought about what he would do with the gold when he returned home, and about how crazy that old man was to have given it away. But at dawn, he gathered up the gold rock and headed back up the mountain to the old farmer's house. The farmer, already awake, was surprised when the folklorist handed the gold back to him. "What? I thought you wanted this rock," he said. The folklorist looked at him intently and answered, "Not anymore. Instead, I want to know what you know that made it so easy to give away."[1]

The wise old farmer knows what is important in life and how to live well. To him, sharing the old songs and stories and the companionship that arises from doing so are more significant and life-enriching than gold. His character expresses two key aspects of simplicity: the knowledge of what is truly enjoyable, fulfilling, and meaningful in life; and the wisdom to know when enough is enough. We contend that these two nuggets of wisdom are intimately related, that achieving a good human life is furthered by material simplicity, that because of this, simplicity is indeed a virtue, and that particularly in our time we neglect this virtue at our peril.

Virtue

We Claim Simplicity is a Virtue[2]—But What is Virtue?

"Virtue" is the generic term commonly used for any character trait people wish to commend. In both common speech and philosophical discourse, "the virtues" refer to those qualities whose possession we believe makes a person a *good* person and

[1] This is a regional adaptation of an older Indian story.

[2] We do not, however, claim the primacy of virtue ethics over other general theoretical approaches to ethics, and nothing that follows depends upon this primacy. Any ethical theory will have some conception of human excellence, or virtue; any plausible ethical theory, we believe, should recognize simplicity (in our sense) as a virtue.

able to succeed in characteristic or important human endeavors, and which also help others to do so.

So the virtues do not float free, admired for their intrinsic brilliance. One's particular table of virtues is closely tied to one's particular conception of what makes for a happy, successful, meaningful, or otherwise worthwhile human life—and to what else, beyond their own well-being, we think people should value. The plausibility of any account of virtue depends first on the plausibility or attractiveness of its ideal of a good human life, second on how convincingly it ties possession of certain character traits to achieving that ideal.

There are numerous conceptions of virtue and human well-being. Let us stipulate ours, for the purposes of this paper. Following Martha Nussbaum (1993) and Aristotle, we initially define the virtues as those traits that help promote human flourishing, individually and collectively. On this view, we value both moral and intellectual excellence, since both help constitute and secure human flourishing. On this view, cultivating the virtues is in our self-interest, but not selfish, since doing so helps us to contribute to the flourishing of our families, neighbors, communities, professions, and indeed the whole complex social web that sustains us and that we in turn should work to sustain.

Following Louke van Wensveen (2000) and Aldo Leopold, however, we amend the tradition and define the virtues as those traits that promote human *and nonhuman* flourishing, individually and collectively. We do this because human beings depend on the basic ecological services provided by a flourishing natural world; because we believe human life is enriched by appreciating nature; and because we value nonhuman flourishing as an important end-in-itself. *We* do not flourish in an ecological vacuum. *We* are not all-important.

It is necessary to distinguish individual, social and ecological flourishing for analytic purposes. But in our opinion, all three are so supremely valuable and so intimately related that no human character trait that undermines any one of these counts as a genuine virtue. In the same way, no human institution that undermines any one of these three kinds of flourishing counts as a truly just or fully intelligent institution. We will not defend these assertions here. The joy to be found in listening to the dawn chorus or watching the spring warbler migration, and the dire predictions of the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (2005) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (2007) *Fourth Assessment Report*, if we continue with "business as usual," should be sufficient evidence that humanity does not flourish in an ecological vacuum.

Obviously, amending Nussbaum and Aristotle as Wensveen and Leopold suggest complicates our lives and our moral decision-making. It is easier (and hard enough) to make principled environmental decisions from an anthropocentric perspective. Nevertheless, this amendment is necessary, for the reasons just given. Our flourishing is tied to nature's flourishing; our flourishing is not all-important.

Following Rosalind Hursthouse (who follows Charles Darwin), in this paper, we accept human beings as one more natural kind that has evolved on earth. On this naturalistic view, people are essentially rational social animals, and virtue judgments follow the same logic as ethological judgments about characteristics or traits in nonhuman animals that contribute to their health, normal functioning, or

superior fitness. On this view, the virtues, at a minimum, are those human traits that favor (1) individual survival, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) pleasure and freedom from pain, and (4) the good functioning of human communities and societies (Hursthouse 1999, p. 202).

Following Ronald Sandler, however, we amend Hursthouse to provide a fuller account of *human* flourishing and to recognize that human beings, as *rational* animals, may appreciate and work to sustain worthwhile ends that are not directly tied to our own flourishing. So in addition to criteria (1)–(4), we assert that the virtues are those character traits that contribute to (5) human autonomy, (6) the acquisition of knowledge, (7) a meaningful life, and (8) the preservation or promotion of other valuable ends beyond human flourishing (Sandler 2007, p. 28). Such an amended vision of human flourishing and human purposes is more in line with our common moral intuitions. It also coheres better with a naturalistic ethical framework, inasmuch as it presents a more accurate view of what human beings are[3] and of our place in the universe.[4]

Obviously, amending Hursthouse as Sandler suggests complicates our judgments about human flourishing. Whether or not we've successfully met criterion (1) is easier to judge than criterion (7); what to do when criteria (3) and (6) conflict is an open question ("when ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise," runs the proverb). Nevertheless, this amendment is necessary, to do full justice to human nature and human potential.[5] We are speaking not merely of human survival or continuance, or of that and hedonistic success, but of human flourishing: the *full* development of *all* our essential (or perhaps, possible) capabilities.

In what follows, we argue that simplicity is a virtue, because its cultivation is necessary if we hope to achieve human flourishing, both individually and collectively, in the broad sense outlined above; and to sustain nature's ecological flourishing, also understood broadly. This seems to us the proper framework in which to consider the status and specify the details of any virtue. However, we recognize that conceptions of flourishing and appreciation of nature vary widely, and we believe a strong case can be made for simplicity as a virtue even for those holding quite different conceptions of human flourishing or nature's value.

[3] For example, we can flourish in more complex ways than the other natural beings we know, so that it makes sense to talk about our living autonomously or meaningfully.

[4] Science has led us to understand our relative cosmic unimportance, appreciate the complexity of other life forms here on earth, and recognize our literal kinship with them. It thus helps make the case for the value and importance of nonhuman living beings. There is something pre-Darwinian, even pre-Newtonian, about the anthropocentrism still common among contemporary ethicists (Rolston 1988).

[5] Hursthouse (1999) limits her criteria in an attempt to achieve the level of rational certainty and consensus that botanists and ethologists can achieve talking to one another about plants and nonhuman animals. But this level of certainty and consensus is forever unattainable among those discussing ethics, precisely because people are more complex than other natural beings, and our goals are more open-ended. In other words: virtue ethics does not solve the meta-ethical problems that bedeviled twentieth century ethical philosophy. *This* is not its value. Its value is in allowing us to intelligently discuss human virtue and flourishing. Best to admit this and work to construct a robust account of human flourishing adequate to this (very important) task: not justifying ethics to the skeptic, beyond a reasonable doubt; but rather, providing provisional guidance (*always* partial, dubitable, and revisable) to those already committed to the task of living the best lives possible.

For example, those who would deny that appreciating and promoting nature's flourishing is a necessary criterion of human virtue (rejecting Wensveen's amendment of Nussbaum) must still acknowledge material simplicity's role in furthering the development of a full range of human capabilities. You may be uninterested in species loss and protected by your society's wealth from the most serious dangers of ecosystem collapse (at least temporarily); still, if you are an American, you must navigate the pitfalls of a high consumption society. Personal bankruptcy, unhealthy obesity, and a focus on possessions rather than relationships and achievements, all remain dangerous pitfalls to your flourishing. Again: those who define human flourishing fairly narrowly (rejecting Sandler's amendment of Hursthouse) may perhaps ignore questions of autonomy or meaning, as they focus on the bare essentials of human flourishing. Still, material overconsumption can undermine our hedonistic well-being and the good functioning of society (Hursthouse's criteria 3 and 4) in fairly obvious ways. Health can be undermined by overeating; savings accounts can be emptied out by overspending; banking systems, apparently, can be overwhelmed by greed and its attendant overreaching.

Material simplicity points us toward a nobler conception of human flourishing and facilitates its accomplishment. But it also improves our chances of achieving more modest or conventional forms of well-being. It is a virtue for eco-saints and moral strivers, but also for just plain folks.[6] This strengthens its claim to virtue-hood. In what follows, we ask our readers to consider material simplicity's potential contributions to happiness, flourishing, or human well-being, however *you* understand them, and over the full range of what *you* consider to be morally acceptable kinds of good human lives; also (if this matters to you), simplicity's potential contribution to the continued survival and flourishing of the five to ten million other species with whom we share the earth. Your assessment of these contributions should control your answers as to whether or not simplicity is a virtue, its relative importance in our lives, and its further detailed specification.

Simplicity

In her seminal article "Non-Relative Virtues: an Aristotelian Approach," Martha Nussbaum provides a useful way to define and distinguish the virtues. "Isolate a sphere of human experience that figures in more or less any human life, and in which more or less any human being will have to make *some* choices rather than others, and act in *some* way rather than some other," she suggests. Crucially, to require the specification of a virtue or a range of virtuous behavior in this area, these choices must be important to people's happiness or well-being. "The 'thin account' of each virtue is that it is whatever being stably disposed to act appropriately in that sphere consists in" (Nussbaum 1993, p. 245). The "full or 'thick' description" of the virtue examines the opportunities and pitfalls that await in the realm of

[6] Compare courage, a virtue for the soldier facing death on the battlefield and for the nervous applicant looking to make a good impression in a job interview.

experience under analysis. It specifies the characteristic thought processes, habituation, and emotional development, ways of looking at the world, and other aspects of human character and training that help us choose well in that particular sphere. And it ties choosing well to *living* well and flourishing as a human being.

Following Nussbaum's schema, we define simplicity as the virtue disposing us to act appropriately within the sphere of our consumer decisions, from food and drink to stereo and housing purchases to cars and airplane travel. As we understand it, simplicity is a conscientious and restrained attitude toward material goods. It typically includes (1) decreased consumption and (2) a more conscious consumption; hence (3) greater deliberation regarding our consumer decisions; (4) a more focused life in general; and (5) a greater and more nuanced appreciation for other things besides material goods, and also for (6) material goods themselves.

As Aristotle noted long ago, people may be much more likely to err in one direction rather than another in particular spheres of human choice, either due to human nature or to the pathologies of their particular societies (*Nicomachean Ethics*, book II, Chap. 8). In Athens in Aristotle's day, men were apparently more likely to err on the side of irascibility than "inirascibility"; hence Aristotle named the virtue with regard to anger "mildness" (book IV, Chap. 5). In wealthy western democracies today, we contend, people are more likely to err on the side of overconsumption than underconsumption. Hence the term "simplicity" is arguably a good one for this virtue (as long as we remember that underconsumption can also be a problem).

Simplicity overlaps with such traditional virtues as temperance (moderation in food and drink), frugality (the responsible and restrained use of wealth), prudence, and self-control.[7] In what follows, we make no attempt to systematically relate our treatment of simplicity, focused on overall material consumption, to traditional discussions of these virtues, which often ranged more narrowly or broadly than ours; and which took place in comparatively poor societies whose economies of scarcity have been replaced by economies of abundance throughout the modern industrialized world. We note, however, that within the tradition, philosophers once routinely claimed that temperance, frugality, and simplicity were keys to living justly and wisely.[8] They were right. We see it as a glaring weakness of contemporary discussions of justice and wisdom that they rarely make this connection.[9]

It is often helpful to consider simplicity as a virtuous mean between vicious extremes. However, like other complex virtues, simplicity appears to be a mean

[7] These virtues, in turn, overlap in the tradition. Note for example that *sophrosune*, the virtue explored in Plato's *Charmides*, may be translated into English as either "temperance" or "soundmindedness," the latter a close kin to prudence.

[8] For a start, see Plato, *Apology* and *Republic*.

[9] Valerie Tiberius's (2008) otherwise excellent book on wisdom makes no connection between material simplicity and her subject. You may find "Terrell, Huntington," in the index to John Rawl's *A Theory of Justice*, but not "temperance." Greater attention to the real world impediments to wisdom and justice would lead philosophers to pay more attention to material simplicity.

along several axes. Some of its associated vices have obvious names, others do not, perhaps owing to their rarity:

Vice	Virtue	Vice
	Simplicity	
Underconsumption (poverty?)		Overconsumption (gluttony)
Unthinking consumption (carelessness)		Overthinking consumption (obsession)
None; or crude consumption (asceticism, "monkish virtue")		Luxurious consumption
Inefficient or pointless consumption (wastefulness)		Hyper-efficient consumption (Penny-pinching)
Immoral consumption (callous, disproportional)		None; or, moral finickiness ("moral foppery")

Obviously, there is more than one way to go wrong in our stance toward consumption!

An Example

Treating simplicity as a virtue presupposes that through reflection, we can discover our deeper, more significant needs and goals; recognize some goals as ignoble, foolish, or trivial, and replace them with better ones; and pursue our goals more efficiently, with less waste and harm to others. By way of illustration, consider some steps a person might take to practice voluntary simplicity in relation to food consumption, as these relate to the six aspects of simplicity noted above.

Americans consume on average 25% more calories than necessary, on a conservative estimate (Putnam et al. 2002). Today, three out of five Americans are overweight and one out of five is obese. This excessive consumption of food harms our health and quality of life (US Department of Health and Human Services 2001). Food overconsumption also causes direct and indirect environmental degradation, through habitat loss and increased pollution from agricultural fertilizers and pesticides (Cafaro et al. 2006). Twenty percent of American greenhouse gas emissions come from growing and transporting our food (Pollan 2007). So here simplicity clearly demands decreased consumption (aspect 1).

However, whether we are talking about personal health, healthy communities, or healthy land, consuming less is not enough. We also need to consume *differently*.[10] We may buy and prepare more healthy foods for ourselves; buy organic foods and local foods and eat less meat, all of which decrease environmental harms; purchase more food directly from farmers at farmers' markets or as part of community-supported agriculture co-ops, to support small farmers and keep local agriculture

[10] This point is emphasized by Crocker (1998), who uses it to de-emphasize the importance of consuming less—mistakenly, in our opinion.

vibrant. Such changes demand attention: a more conscious consumption, involving greater deliberation about our consumer decisions (aspects 2 and 3).

Many food simplifiers combine more conscious consumption with greater participation in food *production*: gardening, raising chickens, keeping bees, or joining CSA cooperatives. Research shows that food produced in these ways is more environmentally sustainable and often more nutritious than conventionally grown food (Felice 2007). These activities are also often enjoyable and interesting, and connect people to their neighbors and to the earth. Similarly, taking time to prepare our own food and eating meals together offer important opportunities to connect to loved ones. Consciously taking such steps leads to a more focused life (aspect 4). It can further develop gratitude toward the many other species that sustain us; tune us into nature's rhythms and details; and enrich our relationships with other people. In these ways, food simplifiers explore and sustain a wide range of nonmaterial goods (aspect 5) and come to better understand and appreciate the material realities of food production and consumption (aspect 6).

The example should begin to suggest how simplicity can contribute to human and nonhuman flourishing in important ways. It also illustrates several important points about simplicity as a virtue.

First, living simply is not necessarily simple. It requires deliberation: thinking through our choices and acting on our best judgment, rather than following the herd, or the blandishments of advertisers, or doing what we have always done, or what comes easiest.[11] Thinking about our food consumption and improving it typically involves research and planning, and some of what we learn about how our food is grown will probably be discouraging or disgusting. Still, it is better to know the ugly facts and act in full consciousness of what we are a part of, rather than in ignorance. Simplicity is better than simple-mindedness, the default setting of the American food consumer (an ignorance that the food industry spends many millions of dollars a year cultivating).

Second, though, simplicity *is* often simple; or rather, it often involves working our way back to simpler, less convoluted ways of doing things. When I plant and tend a garden, ride a bicycle and fix it myself, or sing songs with my children on family outings, these are relatively simple ways of satisfying some of my food, transportation, and entertainment needs. They reverse our modern tendency to an ever more elaborate division of labor; "a principle," as Henry Thoreau once said, "which should never be followed but with circumspection" (Thoreau 1971). The simplicity of such activities makes them less likely to stray from their goals and more likely to involve thoughtful activity rather than passive consumption. Their simplicity, the fact they we can "see all the way through them," may make them particularly appropriate vessels for finding meaning, or expressing happiness and gratitude.

Third, simplicity is not a call to "return to nature" in any romantic or primitivist sense. Old ways can be wasteful, or harmful; new ways can be an improvement. Similarly, simplicity is not opposed to technology, or to new technologies. It just

[11] For this reason, Comte-Sponville (2001) errs in describing simplicity as "an antidote to introspection" and imaging this virtue as a sort of primitive integrity.

asks that we consciously develop and appropriately incorporate technologies into our lives with reference to our real purposes and to their full effects on the world around us. Hydroponics has a role to play, along with sharing heirloom tomato seeds with the neighbors.

Fourth, simplicity is not poverty. Poverty is a state defined by lack, where people find it difficult to obtain the means to satisfy even the essential human needs—food, water, shelter, basic physical safety—let alone higher needs for self-actualization or creative personal development. Poverty means living in deprivation, against one's will. Simplicity is consciously and freely chosen.[12] It provides greater opportunities than conventional materialism to achieve human flourishing, while poverty limits those opportunities.

Fifth, simplicity is a process, not an endpoint. Although we are *arguing* here for simplicity, we have not forgotten Aristotle's reminders that habituation is more important than arguments in developing virtue; and that virtue demands *phronesis*, practical wisdom, applied to the details of life. Anyone who has tried to cultivate simplicity in their own life knows that Aristotle was right. Creating a character, a personal infrastructure, and daily habits that regularly result in less consumption and less dumb consumption, are difficult and ongoing affairs. Hence it is a mistake to look for particular markers that indicate the presence of this virtue (although a Hummer in the driveway pretty clearly indicates its absence. And it is not a mistake, but good practice, to set down markers for ourselves and strive to achieve them).

Sixth, and related to the previous point, simplicity is not uniformity. There are as many ways to cultivate simplicity in our food or other consumption decisions as there are ways to complexify them. Different people will focus on different aspects of these problems, and our solutions should play to our individual interests and strengths (maybe you'd rather brew beer than raise tomatoes; perhaps you're the cook, not the gardener, in the family). Hence lives and lifestyles will legitimately differ. Simplicity need not limit diversity.

Seventh, simplicity, like all the virtues, needs to be cultivated by individuals and families, but also encouraged and sometimes mandated by society, if we hope to secure human and nonhuman flourishing. The very term *voluntary* simplicity emphasizes voluntarism, while most of the literature on material simplicity focuses on individual and small-group action. But this is arguably a failure of this literature (Claxton 1994). Jerome Segal (1999) argues convincingly that creating less materialistic societies will demand fundamental political changes. Discussing the United States, Segal emphasizes changes in economic policy that would help safeguard basic physical and economic security, and thus make it easier for individuals to freely choose less materialistic paths. Because we often "consume because others consume" (Lichtenberg 1998) and because "what counts as necessary [consumption] in a given society" depends in part on "what the poorest members of society require for credible social standing (Schudson 1998), enacting simplicity has an important political component.

[12] However, we want to leave room for *communities* to choose simplicity, not just individuals. We do not agree with a purely voluntaristic view of the cultivation of virtue. The primary purpose of law is to force citizens to act more virtuously than they otherwise would.

Eighth, we are not arguing that we should eliminate or minimize material goals within our lives. Human beings have essential needs that must be met, so we must devote a certain amount of our time and attention to meeting them. Simplicity actually represents a better way of meeting these needs than high levels or unthinking kinds of consumption. In the case of food, "better" means in ways that are healthier, more morally justifiable, and more interesting, enjoyable, and meaningful than business as usual. Simplicity can help us really understand our material needs and meet them efficiently, morally, and even joyfully.

Ninth (and at the risk of sounding grandiose), our short discussion of food simplicity suggests that material simplicity does indeed further justice and wisdom, as philosophers have long maintained. Modern industrial agriculture is callous toward farmers and farm communities, and grossly unjust toward its animal "production units." These injustices are sustained in large part by the ignorance of consumers. Voluntary food simplicity can help reverse this process, as we learn about food and act on what we have learned, try to appreciate the processes involved in feeding us, and honor the various participants in those processes (Berry 1990). To the extent we use resources, take life, or cause pain when we raise or eat food, simplicity enables us to do so consciously and honestly. This opens up a space within which we *may* act justly and wisely. Note that simplicity does not *guarantee* justice and wisdom in this important area of our lives (or in others); it makes them possible.[13] Casual participants in the industrial food status quo, however, cannot act justly or wisely in their food consumption decisions. Those options are not on the menu.

True, few people in our society would look to a person's eating habits to discern whether they are just or wise. But we believe this is a measure of how distracted we have become and how confused about what is really important in life.

Again, others might say that what are really needed are better rules for how farmers should be compensated, food animals treated, and so forth. Then we could follow the rules and eat whatever we wanted, with a clean conscience. We certainly agree on the need for better rules: they are essential to furthering material simplicity politically, and thus helping create more virtuous and just societies. But rules will only get us so far. The world is an unjust place and seems likely to remain so for the foreseeable future; hence we cannot completely rely on "the rules" to tell us how to behave.[14] Further, the idea of purely economic spheres of life, where we can choose freely—that is, without the need to consult anything but our own desires and whims, perhaps restrained by a few basic moral rules—is deeply flawed; part of the economistic view of life that has given us modern industrial agriculture in the first place. Setting up such "duty free zones" blinds us to both responsibilities and opportunities. We think we are increasing our options and our freedom of action; instead, we find we have lost the ability to distinguish right from wrong, or quantity

[13] As one reviewer put it: "simplicity is more like a clearing of the stage. It judges conspicuous consumption" or gluttony "to be not worthwhile, and so eliminates some practices. But it does not itself put a worthier goal in place of consumption." We might say that simplicity is an *enabling* virtue.

[14] Not to mention that rules can neither enact nor apply themselves, facts discussed extensively in the recent philosophical literature.

from quality. But acting on such distinctions, in all areas of our lives, is the very definition of wisdom.

To conclude this section, though, let us descend a bit from the heights. Most people don't aspire to wisdom, and most of us are content to exhibit about the same degree of justice as our neighbors. Most of us concentrate on our own subjective happiness most of the time. Even so, even from this low perspective, we assert the proven failure of materialism. While Americans' average incomes increased from $9,000 in 1957 to $20,000 by the end of the twentieth century (in constant dollars), the percentage describing ourselves as "happy" or "very happy" in national polls declined steeply during this time. Maybe it's time to give material simplicity a try.

The Case for Simplicity as a Virtue

Simplicity is a virtue, we claim, because it furthers human and nonhuman flourishing. For analytic purposes, we next consider six areas in which simplicity can make important contributions: (1) basic individual flourishing, (2) basic societal flourishing, (3) individual freedom/autonomy, (4) the acquisition of knowledge, (5) living meaningfully, and (6) the flourishing of nonhuman beings. We'll address each of these areas in turn. While we primarily consider simplicity in relation to the consumption options of middle-class Americans, we note that high consumption lifestyles are becoming an actual or aspirational norm across much of the world. Furthermore, the issues we discuss, if not their details, remain important across widely diverse societies and social classes. Readers may decide for themselves how much of what follows applies to their own consumption decisions, or their society's, and the right way to apply it.

Basic Human Flourishing

Simplifying our lives and lessening consumption have the potential to significantly improve human health. As already mentioned, Americans on average eat too much; we also often eat nutritionally poor food. Four of the top ten causes of death are directly related to overweight and obesity, including the top three: heart attack, stroke, and cancer (Cafaro et al. 2006, p. 543). In addition to increasing morbidity and mortality, overweight/obesity have further effects that are harmful to happiness, from reducing people's sex drives to lowering their self-esteem. Emerging evidence also suggests that poor nutrition often plays a role in causing depression (Jacka 2007). Nutritionally poor diets influence relevant aspects of our endocrine development, resulting in a weakened stress response system, which in turn makes us more vulnerable to many ailments, such as insomnia, hypertension, asthma, anxiety, and alcoholism (Mokdad et al. 2001). The moderate consumption of essential nutrients modifies the synthesis, storage, release, and action of neurotransmitters in the central nervous system, which makes us less susceptible to psychological disorders resulting from stress (ibid.).

For all these reasons, conscious and temperate food consumption is a key to health. And health, in turn, is the basic grounding for human happiness and flourishing.

Financial over-commitments are another leading cause of unhappiness in modern America. Part of material simplicity is old-fashioned frugality: not buying things unless we are sure we can afford them and there is some rational justification for doing so (Nash 1998). Holding our consumer purchases to this standard will result in fewer purchases. This in turn will mean less worry about their maintenance and care—not to mention fewer payments! The money freed up can go toward personal savings, or providing increased financial security. Alternatively, people with some flexibility can reduce their work hours, freeing up time to spend with their families or in other enjoyable activities (Segal 1998). Either way, we would often increase our happiness by not wasting money on unnecessary stuff (or on unnecessarily expensive stuff). As we spend less time working to pay off debts accumulated from habitual material upgrades and wanton expenditures, we should be able to find more time to cultivate our own passions and visions, and to engage in activities that are truly enjoyable.

As Americans have worked longer hours in recent decades, we have also become more depressed (Cross-National Collaborative Group 1992). Americans work on average 150 more hours per year than we did 50 years ago, and we are ten times more likely to suffer from depression (De Graaf et al. 2002). By passing on the new car or expensive vacation, we could work less. Not only would this be good in itself, it would free up time to play with our children, talk to our spouses, or volunteer in our communities. These sorts of activities strengthen our personal relationships, and psychological studies strongly confirm that positive personal relationships—unlike material wealth—are key to human happiness (Lane 1998; House 1986).

Getting these "basics" right is important—but not all important. Positive psychologists, going back as far as Maslow (1999), have argued convincingly that full human flourishing is experienced in self-actualization and personal growth, after all our basic needs have been met. Higher states of human development involve experiences of transcendence and the appreciation of beauty, artistic creation, the pursuit of knowledge, and spiritual transformation. In these higher states we realize our full potential as human beings and discover the potential for creativity even in mundane activities (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Simplicity makes possible such self-actualized activities and states, in part because it frees up time to pursue them, in part because it provides a more salubrious and effective manner of fulfilling our more basic needs. When we cultivate simplicity, we are more likely to feel assured that our physiological and security needs, our affiliation and affection needs, our self-respect and recognition needs, have all been adequately satisfied. This allows us to move on to our higher-order growth needs. A materialistic perspective, on the other hand, tends to leave us unsatisfied, *no matter how much material success we achieve* (Kasser et al. 2004). Hence we remain insecure, and fail to move beyond the level of basic needs.

Basic Societal Flourishing

Cultivating simplicity also promotes societal flourishing. First, the perpetually dissatisfied attitude fostered by materialism contaminates and undermines our human relationships. The higher married couples score on a standard psychological "materialism" scale, the more likely they are to get a divorce. Materialistic couples also report lower-quality relationships with their partners. According to one researcher: "when people place a strong emphasis on consuming and buying… they may also become more likely to treat people like things" (Kasser 2002). Half of all American marriages now end in divorce; importantly, family counselors claim that 90% of these separations involve financial stress (Bennett 1993). This financial stress could be lessened by reducing our material wants. There is no better indicator of a healthy society than the state of the social unions that comprise it.

Materialism also harms children. Research shows that materialistic parents tend to be less nurturing and supportive than less materialistic parents, leading their children to idolize materialistic social icons and develop feelings of insecurity (Kasser 2002, pp. 30–32). Materialistic parents also tend to have materialistic children, as "experiences that undermine the satisfaction of psychological needs can cause individuals to orient toward materialism as one type of compensatory strategy intended to countermand the distressing effects of feelings of insecurity" (ibid.). But value orientations that stress self-development, creativity, or building social connections, provide more effective sources for children's well-being. David Goleman's (1995) research shows that parents who are less materialistic tend to be happier and have happier, more socially adjusted children.

Simplicity may also give rise to a more developed sense of citizenship and communal responsibility. Instead of pursuing material goods, we may spend our time volunteering and strengthening community institutions.[15] Americans today are often "time poor" (Schor 1992). By freeing up more time to spend with loved ones, neighbors, and community members, simplicity can help us develop the social unions that enrich our lives. By fostering contentment with our status and possessions and reducing levels of dissatisfaction, simplicity can help minimize social tension and build up social capital.

Finally, we need to remember that healthy societies depend on adequate ecosystem services, which are threatened by present consumption levels (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005; IPCC 2007). Our current overconsumption cannot continue indefinitely and needs to end soon—even if only in our own self-interest. Of course, reducing humanity's ecological footprint cannot be just a matter of individual voluntarism; whole nations need to consume less, a reality we are far from facing at the present time. Voluntary simplifiers perhaps provide a greater social service not through the direct effects of their lower consumption, but by showing their fellow citizens that consuming less need not be a horrible imposition, but may actually improve their lives.

[15] Note that material simplicity doesn't *guarantee* any of this. But it does make it more likely. In our observations, fathers who coach their kids' soccer teams, mothers who chaperone school field trips, community activists who show up for city council meetings, all tend to be less materialistic than average.

Freedom and Autonomy

Freedom is a basic human good and a fundamental human desire. Material possessions sometimes increase and sometimes decrease our freedom; it requires wisdom to decide which, in particular instances. Henry Thoreau claimed that "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to leave alone"; he is free, that is, both from the craving for those things and from having to earn the money to buy them. But even Thoreau appreciated being able to take the train from Concord to Boston, rather than walking back and forth every time he had an errand there. He appreciated the freedom a well-built canoe provided in the Maine backcountry.

Full human freedom includes the ability to see and set limits to our pursuit of material goods. We do not deny the value of some stuff for increasing freedom. But we insist that consciously deciding the role of possessions in our lives is one important key to freedom. Whether or not "the market" brings you your goods, letting the market *society* decide what goods you need shows a lack of freedom and can lead to fear, anxiety, and unhappiness (Kanner and Soule 2004). Unfortunately, in America, ubiquitous advertising preaches dissatisfaction and undermines our ability to think intelligently about these matters. One hundred and sixty-three *billion* dollars in advertising was directed at the American public in 2006—almost half the total world advertising budget!—in order to keep us consuming at high levels (World Advertising Research Center 2007). We are overwhelmed by innumerable consumer choices, but as Barry Schwartz's (2004) research has shown, as our material choices increase beyond a certain point, people actually become less happy, less optimistic, and more depressed. By preaching dissatisfaction, advertising leads us to believe that in order to be satisfied we must increase consumption—which ensures less satisfaction. In real ways, the treadmill of over-consumption restricts our freedom and autonomy as individuals.

Take the important example of the automobile, a powerful symbol of freedom for many people, particularly Americans.[16] Today most Americans simply expect that every adult should own their own car and drive it whenever and wherever they want; anything less is seen as seriously cramping our freedom. In reality, given common financial constraints, not owning a car can free up vital resources for students and poorer workers—provided they can get where they need to get without one. Commuting by bicycle or train can be more relaxing and enjoyable, even for wealthier commuters. Millions of people have these options but are unaware of them, so automatic have their transportation decisions become. This cluelessness limits their freedom. Similarly, the development of auto-centric urban areas and our society's failure to provide adequate mass transportation may force many people to buy, drive, and maintain cars who would have preferred not to. It may take away their freedom *not* to drive, *not* to make car payments, *not* to subsidize environmental destruction by the oil companies.

All this is not to say that every American should junk his or her car. We only suggest that in some cases, limiting our automobile use, either individually or

[16] For a more detailed discussion of consumption and cars, see Cafaro (1998).

collectively, may make Americans more free—but that for the most part, we are unable to think clearly about this, because our society tends to confuse us concerning the connections between freedom and consumption. At a minimum, we should try to recognize all the consequences of our transportation and other consumption choices. Acting on the basis of such recognition, personally and politically, is an important part of freedom.

Knowledge

Simplicity also can aid in the acquisition of two important kinds of knowledge. First, simplicity assists us in becoming more self-aware. Simplifying our lives requires us to look within ourselves to distinguish our true needs and most important goals from what is inessential or positively harmful in our lives. It may force us to confront some of our less charming weaknesses and obsessions and some of our more important moral failings. Attempting to practice simplicity can force us to find the proper balance between demanding more from ourselves and showing charity toward our own failings.

Know thyself! It is an essential human task and will help you live a better life, however, you define that. People with greater self-knowledge are better positioned to achieve happier and more meaningful lives and develop the full spectrum of human potentials: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Self-knowledge facilitates the self-control necessary to combat materialism and live more focused lives. All this increases our ability to flourish.

Second, simplicity facilitates local, place-based, ecological knowledge. Such knowledge is good in itself, as Aldo Leopold (1949) illustrates memorably in the first two-thirds of *A Sand County Almanac*; it is also the backbone for much environmental activism. Make this simple experiment. Select a stretch of road that you have often traveled by car, and bicycle along it instead. Next, take even more time and walk it. One of this article's authors once did this along a 10-mile stretch of rural highway in coastal Oregon. Having roared down it every day for a whole summer to and from work, the next summer he traded in his motorcycle for a bicycle, commuting along the same route. There were a thousand and one things that he only noticed once he began to bicycle. People, houses, trees; smells, sounds; the pitch of the terrain, the different water levels in the river at high and low tides. Not all that he noticed was pretty. There were trash dumps and junked cars. But traveling slower, he noticed new construction and shoddy logging practices along the way that made possible informed participation in local zoning hearings and town debates.

This is just an example, but we find it suggestive. Because he no longer owned a motorcycle, your author did not have the choice of driving to work, and was forced to bicycle on days when he often would not have. Here less choice equaled more experience, and less convenience equaled greater knowledge of the local landscape. Modern microeconomics unequivocally says that more choice is better: give an individual a greater number of choices and more money to spend on them, and he can more fully satisfy his preferences (Heyne 1994, p. 178). Modern advertising sends the same message: look at the many new, improved cars, computers, or shaving creams to choose from! But this is unconvincing. For we can choose

wrongly, and in ways that lead to less pleasure, less health, and less knowledge of the world around us. One of the ways we can choose wisely is in deciding to limit our options and leaving them limited. Choosing correctly also involves limiting the amount of time we spend choosing, thus leaving our minds free to deal with more important things (Schmidtz 2008). We believe it involves simplifying our lives so that we maximize knowledge and appreciation of the world, rather than consumption and wealth.

Meaning

Cultivating simplicity can also enhance meaning in our lives by connecting us in rich ways to our inner hopes, visions, and potential. William Frankena thinks finding meaning in life involves "being convinced of the importance of what we care about." Living meaningfully also involves acting in service to goals and ideals that we are convinced are important. Living a life devoted to things and the status they provide is deeply unsatisfying to many people. What people tend to find most meaningful is having good relationships with other people and achieving personal and career goals that, on reflection, make them proud. Materialistic pursuits tend to trivialize our lives, instead of enriching them with meaning. We have already seen that materialism increases the likelihood that we will grow up to be non-nurturing parents, that we will live in fear, and that we will doubt our own self-worth. In order to connect to people and activities that we find meaningful, it helps to get off the materialistic treadmill.

In this regard, we should remember our natural tendency to use material acquisitions to assuage perceived deficiencies. One-third of all shoppers are "shopping therapeutically"; that is, they are shopping to feel better about themselves (De Graaf et al. 2002). Unfortunately, this often leads to further dissatisfaction and discontent (Kasser et al. 2004; Lane 1998). If we keep in mind what human flourishing really requires, we'll remember that money and possessions are merely means, of limited usefulness, and not ends in themselves. Money cannot buy self-esteem, wisdom, or love. It cannot buy the friendship or respect of people whose friendship and respect matters. Before we purchase anything, we should ask ourselves what contribution, if any, the purchase might make toward meeting our highest goals or important projects. We should ask whether our material purchases bring meaning into our lives.

Promoting the Flourishing of Nonhuman Beings

Simplicity promotes human flourishing. Just as clearly, it is necessary to create and preserve space and resources for nonhuman species and ecosystems to flourish (Wensveen 2001). Due primarily to overpopulation and overconsumption, humans are extinguishing animal and plant species a thousand times faster than natural background extinction rates (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). Along with many scientists and environmentalists, we believe that this loss of biodiversity is the most significant environmental problem facing humanity today. The ability of our global biosphere to sustainably provide for human and non-human flourishing is

stressed by continued population growth and by growing global overconsumption. These two trends are negatively synergistic; if we don't reverse them, we may lose up to one-third of the world's species of plants and animals within 50 years (ibid.).

In the face of this overwhelming extinction threat, most people recognize the need to "do something." Buy and set aside more public lands as wildlife habitat; find alternative technologies to limit air and water pollution. These steps are necessary, but not sufficient. We cannot set aside land if we need it to feed our appetites for food, fuel, or other material goods (Cafaro et al. 2006). Technological improvements can alleviate pollution, but without some limits to human demands, the improvements are swamped and pollution increases (as happened in the US over the past 30 years with carbon emissions, as increased energy efficiency was swamped by greater per capita energy demands and by ever more "capitas"; Camarota 2008).

Limiting consumption *must* be part of the solution to the extinction crisis and the other environmental challenges we face in the 21st century. Yet it is a part of the solution that we are very unwilling to face.

Consider global warming. Stephen Pacala and Robert Socolow's "wedge diagram," below, is a heuristic designed to help us think about the steps needed to address global warming (Fig. 1):

Each "wedge" in the "stabilization triangle" above represents a change in human resource use which, if fully implemented, would keep one billion metric tons of

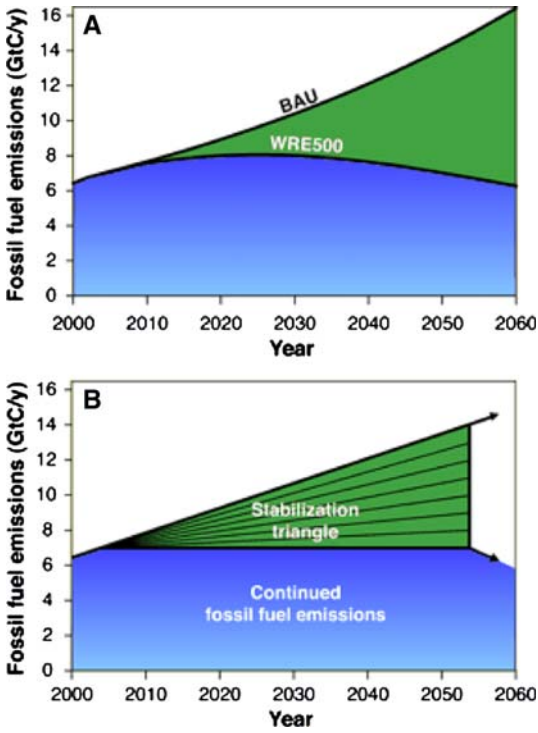

Fig. 1 Source: Pacala and Socolow (2004)

carbon from being pumped into the air 50 years from now. The authors reckon *eight* such wedges must be implemented—not to reduce atmospheric carbon; not to stabilize atmospheric carbon levels—but simply to keep atmospheric carbon from pushing past potentially catastrophic levels during this period.

The key point is that of the sixteen wedges that Pacala and Socolow (2004) propose as most feasible for reducing carbon emissions in a big way, *fifteen* focus on technological changes in energy production (more solar, more nuclear), energy efficiency (increasing average auto fuel efficiency from 30 to 60 mpg), or land use (conservation tillage on agricultural lands); and only *one* focuses on limiting human consumption (cutting the average number of miles driven by automobile drivers in half).[17] One out of 16! Most discussions of global warming are similarly biased toward "technofixes." An influential example was a 2006 proposal for US climate action developed by scientists affiliated with the Natural Resources Defense Council (Lashof and Hawkins 2006). Again, limiting consumption was hardly mentioned; the goal, as always, was to accommodate *more* consumption by *more* people with *less* environmental impact.

Such approaches, in their unwillingness to face the need for people to live more simply, are puerile. More important, *they are unlikely to succeed*. In addition to seeking technological improvements, human societies must find ways to embrace less consumption—or face the consequences in environmental degradation. Environmentalists of all kinds—anthropocentrists and biocentrists, urban environmental justice advocates and wildlands proponents—should all be able to agree on the centrality of reining in human consumption to secure our goals.

Environmental protection is a special case—and a supremely important case—of the more general rule, that individuals and societies that can intelligently moderate their consumption open up a space to preserve and enhance their preeminent values. Preserving the flourishing of nonhuman species should be one of those values. However, even people who do not care about protecting wild nature tend to care about the safety and security of their children and grandchildren. So we conclude this section with the reminder that evidence is rapidly accumulating that our posterity's well-being will depend on keeping human demands on the biosphere within ecological limits (IPCC 2007). That means learning to live more simply.

Objections

In all these ways, we contend, material simplicity helps further human and nonhuman flourishing. For these reasons, simplicity is a virtue. Let us now turn to a few of the most common objections to this position.

One objection runs, "If simplicity provides such wonderful benefits and materialism is so flawed, why are so many people materialistic? There must be something to this approach to life!" We answer that overconsumption and a

[17] Incredibly, *none* of Pacala and Socolow's wedges focus on limiting population growth, despite the critical role it plays in causing global warming (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007). For a discussion of the need for environmentalists to address population issues, see Cafaro and Staples (2009).

materialistic value orientation are heavily promoted in America and elsewhere through advertising, popular culture and our education systems (Richins and Dawson 1992; World Advertising Research Center 2007). This onslaught is more than enough to account for prevailing levels of materialism. Research has also shown that when our psychological needs are not being met in healthy ways, we often substitute material acquisition as a coping strategy to counter the distressing effects of insecurity (Kasser 2002; Kottler et al. 2004). America has higher levels of economic insecurity than most other wealthy industrialized democracies; for example, because we fail to guarantee decent health care for all our citizens. We believe this pushes Americans toward greater materialism. In effect, we adopt materialism as a way of compensating for various inadequacies, either personal or social.

In another possible objection, a devoted urbanite might wonder, "Is simplicity antithetical to urban living?" Despite what our food-focused examples might have suggested, we answer: not at all. As we commit ourselves to simplicity, we will discover that we can cultivate this virtue equally well in the city or the country. Many people who live in larger cities utilize public transportation, eliminating the need for a car. They tend to have necessary services located nearer to their homes or apartments, reducing travel and driving times. Larger concentrations of people may increase opportunities to socialize, or to enjoy a greater variety of cultural activities. "Citizens" also have smaller homes and thus less room to store superfluous possessions and less space to heat and cool. Anyone can cultivate simplicity, anywhere, as long as they commit to living a deliberate life. Materialism and overconsumption tend to impoverish us, regardless of where we live.

A third objector might ask, "What if someone isn't interested in cultivating capacities to fulfill her higher needs? Instead, we may imagine, she is happy having her basic needs met in ever more luxurious ways." There is no proof of the irrationality of this approach to living. Still, we would argue with the sybarite that throughout history, simplicity has proven itself more effective than luxury in satisfying people's basic needs.[18] Materialism *tends* to lead toward overconsumption, which results in many of the problems we've already discussed. And even when our basic needs can be met in luxurious ways, simplicity frees up resources that allow other people and other species to flourish. Fulfilling our basic needs in ever more opulent ways is arguably selfish, and hence open to the standard moral arguments against selfishness.

What of a fourth objector, who accepts the Aristotelian/Maslovian position that human beings should pursue higher goals than mere pleasure or subjective happiness, but who sees no problem with living high on the hog while doing so? There are plenty of artists who live for their art, scientists focused on the pursuit of knowledge, writers devoted to their craft, and philosophers seeking enlightenment regarding the big questions—who are happy to eat *foie gras* and drink Dom Perignon champagne when the opportunity presents itself, or jet around the world to

[18] For the classic argument, see Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* and *Principle Doctrines*. An excellent updating of Epicurus from a modern environmentalist perspective is Stephanie Mills' *Epicurean Simplicity* (2003).

take part in symposia on art, science, literature, or philosophy at expensive resorts. Indeed, those at the top of their fields often enjoy such getaways as a perk of success, a necessary break from their work, and an opportunity to network and enjoy themselves, while those with more middling success still often consume at the highest levels they can afford.

We respond that plenty of artists, writers, and even philosophers have fallen prey to their own poor consumption decisions, undermining their health, financial well-being, personal relationships, or careers. Those pursuing particularly ambitious creative goals may have special reasons for practicing material simplicity, in order to husband financial and psychic resources for their efforts. And of course, the standard moral arguments for fair sharing of resources with others still apply to the creative and successful among us. So simplicity remains a virtue, we think, even in these cases. However, we are not committed to a single vision of human flourishing, or to quibbling about particular consumer purchases; nor do we advocate the complete triumph of Apollo over Dionysus. Our main point is that simplicity allows people to meet their material needs in healthy, equitable, and ecologically and financially sustainable ways.

In a fifth objection, some claim that simplicity is only a virtue for middle-class or rich members of wealthy societies. As one reviewer wrote: "It would not go over well to walk around the slums of Mumbai and tell people that they should practice the virtue of simplicity to help them free up time to pursue self-actualized states and activities." Of course, most of our readers are relatively well-to-do members of wealthy societies. So we could simply accept this objection and continue to advocate for material simplicity, with the caveat that we are not speaking about the choices faced by poor people. This would probably be the less presumptuous and more rhetorically effective response.

However, we are not sure it would be the correct one. It goes without saying that poor people face different consumer decisions than rich people. It also seems clear that compared to rich people, poor people will more often be rationally justified, on prudential or moral grounds, in striving to *increase* their consumption. Still, poor people, like rich people, need to make intelligent consumer decisions; in fact, they may have even greater need to choose wisely and with discipline, because they have a smaller margin of error. Consuming less may allow poor people to stretch their limited resources further, to better support their flourishing and the flourishing of their families. Consuming too much, in the absence of the safety nets safeguarding wealthier classes or nations, may lead to disaster. So the virtue we have defined as "simplicity" arguably remains a virtue for poor people and perhaps even for very poor people, although the word may no longer be appropriate (perhaps at some point "discipline" better captures what is needed in the realm of consumer choices; perhaps as people's consumption options narrow, "temperance" and "frugality" say all that needs to be said).

Note that it is no part of our argument to try to justify poverty, or suggest that poor people accept their poverty. We cannot ignore the need for a fairer distribution of resources within and between the nations of the world. Nevertheless, in our view, virtues are virtues because they further flourishing in the world as it actually exists, warts and all, or because they help us improve it. Individuals may choose to fight

injustice, or focus on furthering their own well-being within particular unjust parameters; they may strive to rise out of poverty, or make their peace with it. In all these cases, we suspect the efforts of those who possess the virtues of simplicity, temperance, and frugality will be more effective than the efforts of those who lack them.

Now consider a sixth and very different kind of objection, from someone who says, "Flourishing be damned! I'll be happy if I get to do whatever I want, whenever I want to do it." This might be the two-pack-a-day smoker, or the fat man who insists on his pint of ice cream after dinner. Or consider the strident materialist, who claims, "Simplicity be damned! I'm happiest when I'm buying more stuff, or showing it off to my friends." We *want* to say such objectors aren't acting rationally. How could they risk dying of emphysema, or cutting 25 years off their lives, for such ephemeral or trivial pleasures? How could they value possessions or status more than experiences and achievements, the real stuff of life? But reason's dictates are not completely clear here. Perhaps all we can do, in such cases, is try to get people to distinguish between long-term happiness and short-term pleasure[19]; and between a subjectively happy life and a life of objective accomplishment that they could imagine endorsing on mature reflection (Czikszentmihalyi 2004).

We might also ask these objectors what kinds of character they believe they are cultivating through their consumption decisions. Burroughs (2002) have shown that the self-centered nature of materialism leads individuals to replace intrinsically satisfying personal relations with less fulfilling, extrinsic relations to objects. They have shown that this substitution directly conflicts with both family and community values. What type of people do we want to become? Do we want to be selfish and focused on possessions as central to our satisfaction and well-being? Or, would we rather make personal development, family relationships, community successes, and real hope for a sustainable future our greatest sources of happiness? We are, as Milton Friedman liked to say, "free to choose."

A seventh and final objection might claim that materialism and high levels of consumption are necessary to the proper functioning of society, because they keep the economy growing; hence that simplicity, far from being a virtue, is in fact a vice. While philosophers are not likely to raise this bold objection, it finds voice soon enough on those rare occasions when members of our society debate the idea of limits to growth (Nash 1998). This objection was first memorably raised and subtly defended by Bernard Mandeville, in his "Fable of the Bees." Fully answering it would involve exploring and defending the steady-state economy as advocated by Daly and Cobb (1989) and comparing its long-term prospects to those of our current, endless growth economy. We believe the endless growth economy is an ecological impossibility and a blind alley in the human career, which is destined for higher things. For these reasons, we believe that whatever the obstacles, humanity

[19] Pleasure is ephemeral, experienced most strongly when we satisfy basic needs for food, sex, safety, or comfort. Happiness, on the other hand, refers to the positive feelings people experience when they break through the limits of homeostasis—when they do something that stretches them beyond what they are (Seligman 2000). Psychologists have shown that pleasant experiences are not the sole or even primary determinants of happiness, thus understood. We are all probably aware of some vice we pursue that while pleasurable in the moment, is likely to cause us unhappiness in the long run.

must eventually transition to a steady-state economy. Defending such a large claim is a project for another day. *Creating* such an economy is probably a project for a better generation of Americans. When such an effort is eventually made (probably under duress) the full value of material simplicity may become clear. But in the meantime, we believe simplicity's many benefits to us, right now, amply justify its status as an important human virtue.

Conclusion

We do not mean to dispose of these seven objections too easily. Each of them points to some limits or qualifications to the virtue of simplicity, or suggests complications in fully specifying or living it. But in the end, they do not shake the case for this virtue, because reining in consumption is more necessary than ever to human and nonhuman flourishing. Today one in three children born in the United States is likely to develop diabetes during his or her lifetime, due to poor diet and obesity; the atrophic "dead zone" at the mouth of the Mississippi River is larger than New Jersey, and growing; and global temperatures continue to climb. In a world where all this is true, simplicity is indeed a virtue.

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