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## CHAPTER 11



# Personal Choices, Consumerism, and Human Nature

### *Consumerism vs. Synergism*

How should I live my life? No question is more important. The 1993 bestseller *Chicken Soup for the Soul* includes the following, found on a bulletin board:

This life is a test.  
It is only a test.  
Had it been an actual life  
You would have received  
Further instructions on  
Where to go and what to do!<sup>1</sup>

This is correct. In our actual lives we receive a lot of instructions on where to go and what to do. Much of it comes from advertisements telling us to buy something. Radio talk show host Dave Ramsey writes in his 1999 book *More Than Enough*:

We live in the most marketed-to society in the history of the world. . . . Frogs selling beer, pantyhose hatching from eggs, Beanie Babies in McDonald's Happy Meals, sports figures pitching bill consolidation, and small dogs marketing tacos are enough to make you wonder what's next. Superstores that seem to be entire cities under one roof, warehouse stores with "great" buys, triple coupon days when Jupiter aligns with Mars, and billions and billions served—is there an end?<sup>2</sup>

Politicians generally favor economic growth and lower taxes so we have more money to spend. Economists credit people who can buy more with a higher standard of living, which they endorse. More is better.

The present chapter questions these ideas. It argues that most middle-class people may be better off with less money. Less money! How is that possible? This *contradicts the influential idea that life improves with increased spending power.*

We should be wary of influential, entrenched ideas, writes Alfie Kohn in *Punished by Rewards*:

The time to worry is when the idea is so widely shared that we no longer even notice it, when it is so deeply rooted that it feels to us like plain common sense. At the point when objections are not answered anymore because they are no longer even raised, we are not in control: we do not have the idea; it has us.<sup>3</sup>

Today, an idea that has many of us confuses welfare with wealth, equating the better life with increased consumption. This idea underpins our consumer society.

Overcoming this idea supports environmental synergism, the view that human beings as a group fare best when they care about nonhuman nature for itself. Synergists reject any fundamental conflict between human beings and the rest of nature. Human flourishing generally goes hand in hand with healthy ecosystems and protected biodiversity. Native American religions, deep ecology, and some interpretations of Christianity endorse environmental synergism. However, *if the prevailing consumerist idea is correct, synergism is flawed. If human welfare requires increased consumption, then our welfare jeopardizes healthy ecosystems and protected biodiversity, because consumer lifestyles degrade nature.*

Increased consumption requires increased production. Organizational theorist David Korten points out in his 1995 book *When Corporations Rule the World*:

About 70 percent of this productivity growth has been in . . . economic activity accounted for by the petroleum, petrochemical, and metal industries; chemical-intensive agriculture; public utilities; road building; transportation; and mining—specifically, the industries that are most rapidly drawing down natural capital, generating the bulk of our most toxic waste, and consuming a substantial portion of our nonrenewable energy.<sup>4</sup>

Worldwatch associate Alan Durning also notes that environmental degradation accompanies increases in consumption. Consumption is greatest in industrial countries, he writes: "Industrial countries, with one fourth of the globe's people, consume 40–86 percent of the earth's various natural resources. . . . The average resident of an industrial country consumes 3 times as much fresh water, 10 times as much energy, and 19 times as much aluminum as someone in a developing country." Such consumption hurts nature:

Industrial countries' factories generate most of the world's hazardous chemical wastes. . . . And their air conditioners, aerosol sprays, and factories release almost 90 percent of the chlorofluorocarbons that destroy the earth's protective ozone layer. . . . The fossil fuels that power the consumer society are its most ruinous input. Wrestling coal, oil, and natural gas from the earth permanently disrupts countless habitats; burning them causes an overwhelming share of the world's air pollution; and refining them generates huge quantities of toxic wastes.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, Durning writes, "As people [enter] the consumer class, their impact on the environment makes a quantum leap. . . . Purchases of cars, gasoline, iron, steel, coal, and electricity, all ecologically . . . damaging to produce, multiply rapidly."<sup>6</sup> In sum, consumer lifestyles degrade nature. So if human flourishing depends on continued and increased consumption, environmental synergism is incorrect. People cannot flourish while valuing nature for itself and protecting ecosystems and biodiversity.

The present chapter supports synergism by challenging the link between human welfare and high levels of consumption. It challenges the view held by many economists that it is **human nature** for people to flourish through satisfaction of insatiable desires for consumer items. Gauging "human nature" by noting tendencies found in (almost) all human beings, this chapter argues that where consumption is already high, *people do best without growing economies or increased incomes, because high consumption frustrates needs rooted in human nature*. The next chapter discusses public policies that affect poorer countries as well as rich ones.

### *Justifications of Economic Growth*

Some people in the United States are desperately poor and hungry. David Korten quotes a 1993 article featuring a CBS-TV interview of a sharecropper's child in Alabama:

"Do you eat breakfast before school?"  
 "Sometimes, sir. Sometimes I have peas."  
 "And when you get to school, do you eat?"  
 "No, sir."  
 "Isn't there any food there?"  
 "Yes, sir."  
 "Why don't you have it?"  
 "I don't have the 35 cents."  
 "What do you do while the other children eat lunch?"  
 "I just sits there on the side" (his voice breaking).  
 "How do you feel when you see the other children eating?"  
 "I feel ashamed" (crying).<sup>7</sup>

In 1998, the organization Bread for the World noted: "Hunger remains a pervasive reality for millions of people in the United States. . . . A U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study reports that 11.2 million people live in households that are food insecure, meaning they cannot afford enough food for their families."<sup>8</sup>

How can we help such people? Many advocate improved educational opportunities and economic growth. Economic growth is needed, they say, to provide good jobs that pay well. An education without a job does not put food on the table.

Economic growth and related job opportunities require increased consumption. Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez, experts in the field of simplified living, write in their 1992 bestseller *Your Money or Your Life*: "By the early 1920s a curious wrinkle had emerged in the U.S. economy. The astounding capacity of machinery to fill human needs had been so successful that economic activity was slowing down."<sup>9</sup> *When each worker can produce more of what people want, fewer workers are needed to fulfill human wants, and unemployment rises.* This is a problem, especially for poor people. *The solution is increased demand for goods and services.* Robin and Dominguez quote Victor Lebow, a U.S. retailing analyst, who maintained shortly after World War II:

Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption. . . . We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.<sup>10</sup>

Lebow's project of increasing consumerism was a success, write Robin and Dominguez:

Americans used to be "citizens." Now we are "consumers"—which means (according to the dictionary definition of "consume") people who "use up, waste, destroy and squander."<sup>11</sup> If we don't consume, we're told, masses of people will be thrown out of work. Families will lose their homes. Unemployment will rise. Factories will shut down. Whole towns will lose their economic base. We *have* to buy widgets to keep America strong. . . . So . . . a day at the mall can be considered downright patriotic.<sup>12</sup>

Consumer demand not only keeps people working, the growing economy that it fosters increases tax revenues. This helps the government provide public education, school lunch programs, and other services for poor people.

Victor Lebow's call for people to seek "ego satisfaction" in consumption has been widely heard, reports Alan Durning: "Opinion surveys in the world's two largest economies—Japan and the United States—show that people increasingly measure success by the amount they consume."<sup>13</sup>

*Besides satisfying the ego, buying and owning "stuff" can be functional and fun.* I like to go to the movies. I need a car to get there, and to my work, because the streets in my town lack bicycle lanes and some drivers are aggressive when bicycles are in "their" lanes. Bicycling seems particularly dangerous after dark, when most movies are shown and many of my classes are over. My wife has her own car for the same reasons. When going greater distances, we sometimes fly. In 1997, I flew to a conference in Australia, and in 1999, I jetted to New Orleans, Louisiana, and Oxford, England to lecture.

I have many consumer items. I particularly like my hot-air popcorn popper because it lets me pop popcorn without oil. This saves calories so I can eat more. My wife and I have a kitchen with other gadgets, as well as a house with furniture in every room. You get the idea. We have a lot of "stuff," and most

of what we have we enjoy. It seems to improve the quality of our lives. Our purchases also help the economy grow, encourage employment in the United States and elsewhere, and raise tax revenues.

But what about the environment? Most of what I own is made of wood, metal or plastic. The wood comes from cutting down trees. This may harm forest ecosystems. Energy is used to cut and transport the wood. Metal comes from rocks that are often mined in environmentally destructive ways and then smelted using enormous amounts of (usually) fossil fuel energy. This adds to global warming. Smelting creates toxic byproducts as well. Plastics are petrochemicals whose manufacture uses a lot of energy and produces health-damaging toxic wastes. I consume additional energy when I use many of my items—microwave, popcorn popper, lawnmower, automobile, etc.

What a mess! It seems that our “good life” harms nature. Consider energy consumption alone. David Korten notes that averting the worst of global warming seems to require eventually lowering per capita carbon dioxide emissions to the equivalent of “one liter of carbon-based fuel per day.”<sup>14</sup> This allows going about 15 miles by car, 31 by bus, 40 by train, or just over 6 by plane. I would have to save up for more than 6 years to fly to Australia and back, and would not be able to drive my car, use the toaster, or buy any new “stuff” during all that time, to avoid using more than my share of energy. This seems unrealistic. How can synergism be correct? How can people flourish while valuing nature for itself and living in ways that preserve ecosystems and biodiversity? *It appears to be human nature to want comforts, conveniences, and travel that harm the rest of nature. Fortunately, this appearance is deceiving.*

### *High Consumption and Human Welfare*

*Economic growth and increased personal consumption do not always improve people's sense of well being. In *The Battle for Human Nature*, psychologist Barry Schwartz discusses the work of economist Tibor Scitovsky. Schwartz writes:*

Scitovsky cites the results of surveys of how happy Americans thought they were over a twenty-five-year period from 1946 to 1970. During this period, real (inflation-adjusted) income in the United States rose 62 percent. So people on the whole were much better off in 1970 than they were in 1946. Yet this large change in material welfare had absolutely no effect on happiness ratings. People were no happier in 1970 than they were in 1946, although if you had asked them, in 1946, how happy they would be if they had the standard of living that they actually did have in 1970, nearly everyone would have been ecstatic.<sup>15</sup>

The disconnect between happiness and overall consumption continues in the United States. Writing in 1992, Alan Durning notes:

Regular surveys by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago reveal . . . that no more Americans report they are “very happy” now than in 1957. The “very happy” share of the population has fluctuated around one-third

[between 31 and 35 percent of people reporting themselves to be "very happy"] since the mid-fifties, despite near-doublings in both gross national product and personal consumption expenditures per capita.<sup>16</sup>

The same phenomenon exists internationally as well, Durning reports:

A landmark study in 1974 revealed that Nigerians, Filipinos, Panamanians, Yugoslavians, Japanese, Israelis, and West Germans all ranked themselves near the middle on a happiness scale. Confounding any attempt to correlate material prosperity with happiness, low-income Cubans and affluent Americans both reported themselves considerably happier than the norm. . . .<sup>17</sup>

What accounts for these results? *It is human nature for the happiness people derive from consumption to be largely comparative. First, people compare their current consumption unfavorably with increased consumption, writes Lewis Lapham:*

No matter what their income . . . Americans believe that if only they had twice as much, they would inherit the estate of happiness. . . . The man who receives \$15,000 a year is sure that he could relieve his sorrow if he had only \$30,000 a year; the man with \$1 million a year knows that all would be well if he had \$2 million a year.<sup>18</sup>

Yet increased income seldom brings long-term benefits because the higher income becomes a new basis for comparison. It seems that for most people the initial happiness diminishes as comparisons are made to even greater affluence.

This may result from what psychologists call affective contrast, which is used to explain drug addiction. The pleasure that people experience with drugs diminishes over time as they get used to it. For a time people can take increasing doses to get the pleasure they had at first. But when they reach the limit of their body's ability to tolerate the drug, increasing doses are no longer possible. Then they are addicted not because the drug continues to bring pleasure, but because doing without the drug is painful.

Barry Schwartz compares this to the transformation of consumer luxuries—"air conditioners, cars, telephones, televisions, washing machines, and the like"<sup>19</sup>—into necessities. Air conditioning, for example, gives pleasure at first. But as we become habituated to it individually and it becomes the social norm, we take it for granted, no longer notice it, and no longer get pleasure from it. At that point we "need" it to avoid the unusual (to us) discomfort of experiencing prolonged heat in the summer.

A second reason increased consumption does not make people happier concerns comparisons people make between themselves and others. *People feel deprived when others with whom they compare themselves have more than they do.* Durning observes:

Psychological data from diverse societies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, Brazil, and India show that the top income strata tend to be slightly happier than the middle strata, and the bottom group tends to be least

happy. The upper classes [in rich countries] . . . are no more satisfied than the upper classes of much poorer countries.<sup>20</sup>

Because of such comparisons, Durning reports, some Wall Street dealmakers during the 1980s boom suffered anxiety and self-doubt when they earned only \$600,000 per year. Most of us can think of talented sports figures who would be insulted by contract offers of \$1 or \$2 million per year because others earn more.

*In sum, human nature prevents overall increases in affluence through a growing economy from increasing general happiness. People become used to, "addicted" to, higher levels of consumption, and their increased affluence disappoints due to invidious comparisons they make between themselves and those who are wealthier still.*

Worse yet, the gap between rich and poor is increasing. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and the middle class is losing ground in the United States. Bread for the World policy analyst Lynette Engelhardt reported in 1998:

Over the past two decades, the gap between rich and poor in the United States has increased dramatically. The wealthiest 1 percent of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined. . . . A 1997 study by the Center on Budget and Policy priorities found that since the mid-1970s, the income of the richest fifth of Americans grew by 30 percent while that of the poorest fifth fell by 21 percent.

Over the last five years, corporate profits have risen by about 62 percent in real terms. CEO salaries have increased dramatically as well. In 1978, CEOs earned about 60 times the pay of the average worker. In 1989, the ratio had increased to 122. By 1995, CEOs were paid at a rate 173 times higher than the average worker in the U.S.<sup>21</sup>

Tax laws also increase the income gap. Sociologist Walden Bello reports in *Dark Victory* that tax "reform" in the early 1980s "reduced . . . the tax share of the top 1 per cent of the population . . . by 14 per cent, while that of the bottom 10 per cent rose by 28 per cent."<sup>22</sup> In August 1999, Congress passed a tax bill, later vetoed by the president, that also favored the rich. Eighty percent of its benefits were for the top 10 percent of taxpayers.<sup>23</sup>

The poor also lose government help as welfare and food-assistance programs are cut to balance the federal budget in the face of diminished contributions from the rich. Think again about that poor child in Alabama who lacked 35 cents for a school lunch. Does our economy as a whole have to grow to feed that child? The problem is not the size of the economy or the presence of food, but the availability of jobs and the distribution of money and food. *In general, an increasing percentage of people suffer genuine deprivation as gaps between rich and poor increase, and they suffer less when the gap is reduced.*

David Korten gives this example from history, illustrating the misery that befalls most people, even when the economy is growing, if inequality increases:

Economists estimate that between 1750 and 1850, Britain's per capita income roughly doubled, but the quality of life for the majority of people steadily declined.



Before 1750, travelers to the British countryside reported little evidence of deprivation. For the most part, people had adequate food, shelter, and clothing, and the countryside had a prosperous appearance.<sup>24</sup>

By 1850, common people lived in the squalor that Charles Dickens described in his novels. But then the reverse took place, Korten tells us: "Conditions for ordinary people in Britain improved from 1914 . . . through the end of World War II . . . when there was no overall growth in Britain's national income. . . . The real purchasing power of most wage-earner households improved."<sup>25</sup> The United States experienced the same pattern, Korten maintains: "The imperatives of the depression of the 1930s and World War II galvanized political action behind measures that resulted in a significant redistribution of income and built the strong middle class. . . ."<sup>26</sup> Continued economic growth since the early 1970s, however, has resulted in growing inequality that leaves most Americans behind.

The greater importance of equality than of economic growth to human well being is illustrated internationally as well. For example, Korten writes: "Saudi Arabia's literacy rate is lower than Sri Lanka's, despite the fact that its per capita income is fifteen times higher. Brazil's child mortality rate is four times that of Jamaica, even though its per capita income is twice as high."<sup>27</sup> By the end of the 1980s, the infant mortality rate for African Americans in the U.S. was higher than for people in much poorer Cuba.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, human beings, like all living things, need to consume to live. However, economic growth, as currently conceived and measured, is unnecessary in the U.S. to meet material needs or foster happiness. And when policies that promote growth increase inequality of income, the results are unhappiness and serious material deprivation.

### *Marketing Discontent*

*The nature of marketing and advertising helps to explain why economic growth leads to unhappiness.* Economic growth and high employment require that people consume more. But what motivates people to consume more, especially when additional consumption strains budgets or creates debt? We have looked at two reasons so far: Increased consumption can be addictive, and people want what others already have. Both of these are tied to another factor—marketing and advertising.

Political scientist Benjamin Barber notes in his 1995 book *Jihad vs. McWorld*: "Global advertising expenditures have climbed a third faster than the world economy and three times faster than world population, rising sevenfold from 1950 to 1990 from a modest \$39 billion to \$256 billion."<sup>29</sup> David Korten adds that corporations spent "another \$380 billion . . . on packaging, design, and other point-of-sale promotions. Together, these expenditures amounted to \$120 for every single person in the world." This is "well over half as much per capita . . . as the \$207 per capita . . . the world spends on public education."<sup>30</sup>

Korten remarks:

Today, television is the primary medium through which corporations shape the culture and behavior of Americans. The statistics are chilling. The average American child between the ages of two and five watches three and a half hours of television a day; the average adult, nearly five hours. . . . At this rate, the average American adult is seeing approximately 21,000 commercials a year, most of which carry an identical message: "Buy something—do it now!"<sup>31</sup>

Ads can be enormously effective. Alan Durning quotes a "specialist in marketing to children [who] told the *Wall Street Journal*, 'Even two-year-olds are concerned about their brand of clothes, and by the age of six are full-out consumers.'"<sup>32</sup> Dave Ramsey cites a study that links television viewing with consumer spending:

Juliet B. Schor, in her book *The Overspent American*, states that her research shows that each added hour of television viewing increases a consumer's spending by roughly \$200 per year. So an average level of TV watching of fifteen hours per week equals nearly \$3000 extra spent per year. When you consider a study by A. C. Nielsen Co. that says in 1996 Americans watched 250 billion hours of TV, the overspending as a culture is incredible.<sup>33</sup>

*Far from leading to happiness, purchases stemming from advertisements rest on creating discontent.* Ramsey writes:

Professional marketers and advertisers understand that they have to point out a need to you so you will recognize a need you didn't know you had. When you recognize that need, [a] process . . . has started [that] will end in frustration and finally purchase. . . . If you are a good marketer or advertiser your job is to bring dissonance or a disturbance to the person receiving your message. . . . That is the essence of marketing, to create an emotional disturbance.<sup>34</sup>

Alan Durning agrees: "Many ads offer little information, trafficking instead in images evoking sexual virility, eternal youth, existential fulfillment, and infinite other variations on the 'wouldn't-you-like-to-be-like-this' theme." The ads work when they convince people to be dissatisfied with their current lives and selves. Durning notes:

Advertisers especially like to play on the personal insecurities and self-doubt of women. As B. Earl Puckett, then head of the Allied Stores Corporation, put it 40 years ago, "It is our job to make women unhappy with what they have." Thus for those born with short, skinny eyelashes, the message mongers offer hope. For those whose hair is too straight, or too curly, or grows in the wrong places, for those whose skin is too dark or too light . . . advertising assures us that synthetic salvation is close at hand.<sup>35</sup>

*Advertisers invent so many ways people can be unhappy with themselves that few people who heed their messages can ever be content. There are always more flaws to overcome.*

*Advertising leads to discontent also when it rests on unrealistic associations that create unfulfilled expectations.* Political Scientist Benjamin Barber notes that Nike sells an image more than anything: "Humankind walked the globe for millennia without the specialty items developed in the last few decades for professional athletes," Barber writes. "Today . . . 40 percent of all shoes sold are already athletic shoes. . . ." Nike's success depends, according to Liz Dolan, corporate communications vice president, on being "not a shoe company . . . [but] a sports company." Nike CEO, Phillip H. Knight, wrote in his 1992 annual report: "How do we expect to conquer foreign lands? We will simply export sports, the world's best economy." Barber comments:

Well, not exactly sports and not just sports, but the image and ideology of sports: health, victory, wealth, sex, money, energy. . . . If actual athletes were the only consumers of athletic shoes, there would be far too few of them to keep sales perking . . . , so the object becomes to make those who watch athletics believe that in wearing Nikes they too are athletes, even if they [just sit in] armchairs. . . .<sup>36</sup>

But most people can fool themselves for only so long. Convinced that athletes are the highest form of humanity, they are distraught when they eventually look in the mirror.

Barber makes similar comments about soft drink ads that associate consumption

with new "needs," new tastes, new status. You must drink because it makes you feel (your choice): young, sexy, important, "in," strong, sporty, smart, with it, cool, hot (as in cool), athletic, right on, part of the world as in we-are-the-world . . . : in sum, like a winner, like a hero, like a champion, like an American, which is to say, above all, fun-loving (as in blondes have more).<sup>37</sup>

Obviously, people whose lives are really not that much fun will be frustrated by attempts to sweeten their sourpusses with soft drinks. And then there really is a new need. ("It's down that hall and to the left." "Thank goodness.")

Syndicated columnist Dave Barry gives an amusing account of disappointment stemming from expectations raised by marketing. American Airlines announced that Barry's flight would have "bistro service." Barry writes:

I honestly wasn't sure what "bistro" meant but it sounded French, which I thought was a good sign. . . .

When the plane took off, I opened my "bistro" sack. Here are the items it contained: 1) a container of yogurt, 2) a "breakfast bar" made from compressed dried wood chips, and 3) the greenest, coldest, hardest banana I have ever touched in my life.

Why did the airline call it "bistro service?" The image it conjures up is of a cozy little place on a picturesque little street in Paris, with candlelit tables for two occupied by lovers kissing, drinking wine [and] enjoying French food. . . .

Why [call it "bistro service"]? The answer is marketing. . . . "Bistro service" . . . sounds a LOT better, from a marketing standpoint, than "a sack of inedible objects."<sup>38</sup>

Similar logic leads marketers of sport utility vehicles to suggest that each of us is the rugged type ready to take our chances off road, going over the mountain rather than around it. Have my neighbors with SUVs in central Illinois not noticed the absence of mountains? When they go off road, whose corn or soybean fields do they go through?

*Succumbing to marketing hype breeds discontent also because it strains budgets.* SUVs are between two and four times the price of my little car. Families that pay together may not stay together. Divorce often follows financial troubles.

Debt compounds the problem. (I take credit for all word play.) Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez write that young people are particularly at risk: "Young Americans currently spend an average of \$1.20 for every \$1 that they make." Credit cards promote debt. "A survey reported in *The People's Almanac* indicates that people spend 23 percent more when they buy with credit cards than when they buy with cash."<sup>39</sup> Debt, in turn, breeds bankruptcy, which became so common in Illinois that in 1998 the state passed tougher bankruptcy laws to discourage the practice. (This is Chapter 11.)

Dave Ramsey sums it up this way:

The more we are pummeled with ads the more we buy, chasing that brass ring of happiness around our own little gerbil wheel. Living in the most marketed-to civilization in history means we are systematically having our contentment stolen. All of this disturbance has led us to be very discontented people. This discontent is taking our wealth and our relationships.<sup>40</sup>

### *Extrinsic Motivations and Their Limits*

One of the ideas we have been critiquing is that consumption is good because it creates jobs. Slacking consumer demand would throw people out of work. So advertisers perform a valuable service when they sow discontent. A different justification for the consumer society is that consumer discontent among workers is needed to keep them productive. In this view, people work primarily or exclusively for a paycheck. When they have unmet consumer "needs," they compete with one another to earn more money, and are forced in the process to improve efficiency and productivity.

Notice that the second justification for consumerism clashes with the first. The first assumes that technological innovation makes workers too productive. Over-consumption is needed to mop up excess productivity. The second as-

**Ad Men!**

Nagging doubts? Trouble sleeping?  
Has pimping for the Man got you  
tossing and turning?

**ETHIC-EZE!**

Bob Label of North Dakota writes

*"Feelings of remorse nearly ruined my career at Sasquatch & Sasquatch. But now I'm proud of the work I do. Ethic-Eze made shedding pounds of guilt almost effortless. Thank you."*

**FAST ACTING RELIEF  
FOR YOUR TROUBLED CONSCIENCE**

*Recommended by 4 out of 5 psychiatrists.*

Courtesy of Adbusters Media Foundation. [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)

sumes, by contrast, that greater productivity is needed. Why is it needed? Maybe to meet consumer demand! (You see, ideas do not have to make sense to be accepted by most of us most of the time. Familiarity with the ideas and their acceptance by others often substitute for logic. This applies to all of us and justifies vigilant social criticism and frequent self-examination.)

In any case, this justification for consumerism rests on the idea that extrinsic motivation is needed to keep people working. **Extrinsic motivators** are reasons for engaging in an activity that stem from the activity, like a paycheck for work, but are not part of that activity. **Intrinsic motivators**, by contrast, are reasons that not only stem from the activity but are part of it. Unpaid singers in a community or church choir, for example, typically participate for intrinsic reasons. They like music, want to sing, enjoy socializing, value the arts, and so forth. Engaging in the activity is rewarding in itself. A paid singer may be motivated intrinsically in all of these ways, too, but to the extent that she is motivated by pay, she is motivated extrinsically as well.

**Behaviorism**, a psychological theory, says that our social actions are shaped by their external results. *Behaviorists believe that it is human nature for people to work*

for the benefit of others only if they receive extrinsic rewards. Society can be assured of sufficient labor only by arranging rewards to motivate laborers. Enticing people to work for a paycheck, which they need to buy consumer items made attractive by advertising, secures the labor needed to maintain civilization and secure human well being.

This is another rationale for claiming that consumerism is needed for human flourishing. But because consumerism degrades nature, this idea contradicts the synergist thesis that humans fare best when they value nature for itself and protect biodiversity.

Fortunately for environmental synergism, much evidence contradicts behaviorism. Psychologist Alfie Kohn claims in *Punished by Rewards* that much human motivation is intrinsic, and that extrinsic motivators often actually interfere with intrinsic motivation. He cites a host of studies. Here is one:

Take smoking cessation. A very large study, published in 1991, recruited subjects for a self-help program designed to help people kick the habit. Some were offered a prize for turning in weekly progress reports; some got feedback designed to enhance their motivation to quit; everybody else (the control group) got nothing. What happened? Prize recipients were twice as likely as the others to return the first week's report. But three months later, they were lighting up again more often than those who received the other treatment—and even more than those in the control group. . . . Not only were rewards unhelpful; they actually did harm.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Kohn reports:

More research has been done on applying behaviorism to the promotion of seat belt use. The result: programs that rewarded people for wearing seat belts were the *least* effective over the long haul. In follow-up measures ranging from a month to more than a year later, programs that offered prizes or cash for buckling up found changes in seat belt use ranging from a 62 percent increase to a 4 percent decrease. Programs without rewards averaged a 152 percent increase.<sup>42</sup>

Such studies suggest that people often have intrinsic motivations unrelated to extrinsic rewards. What are these motivations and how do they relate to human welfare?

### *Some Intrinsic Motivations*

One intrinsic motivation that benefits society is *curiosity*. Kohn writes: "All of us start out in life intensely fascinated by the world around us and inclined to explore it without any extrinsic inducement. It is not part of the human condition to depend on rewards" to motivate curiosity.<sup>43</sup>

Kohn notes, too, several other psychological theories at odds with behaviorist assumptions that people are unproductive except when motivated extrinsically:

All the work showing that we are motivated by a need to attain a sense of competence (Robert White), to be self-determining (Richard deCharms, Edward Deci,

and others), . . . or to “actualize” our potential in various ways (Abraham Maslow) implicitly refutes the idea that it is natural to do as little as possible.<sup>44</sup>

*Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of a **practice** helps explain productive behavior that is independent of extrinsic rewards. A practice is a socially created form of cooperative activity with built-in standards of excellence. Consider, MacIntyre writes:*

the practice of portrait painting as it developed in Western Europe from the late middle ages to the eighteenth century. The successful portrait painter is able to achieve many goods which are . . . external to the practice of portrait painting—fame, wealth [and] social status. . . . But those external goods are not to be confused with the goods which are internal to the practice. The internal goods are those which result from an extended attempt to show . . . how the face at any age may be revealed as the face that the subject of the portrait deserves.<sup>45</sup>

Socially created standards of excellence internal to the practice motivate dedicated painters and give them a sense of connection to one another and to an ongoing tradition.

MacIntyre gives chess as another example. He imagines that a child might originally be attracted to chess by external rewards, such as money for winning or quality time with a parent. But the child may later enter the practice of chess. Then she will

find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands.<sup>46</sup>

The difference is significant. For example, if the child just wants money, she may be tempted to cheat, but after immersing herself in the practice of chess, if she cheats, she cheats herself.

Science, too, is a practice for those genuinely interested in knowledge. Doing good research is internally rewarding. People who research merely for profit or external recognition, however, may be tempted to fudge their data and fake significant results.

*In sum, where practices are concerned, internal rewards are not only effective, but in some ways superior to the external rewards that behaviorists emphasize. People engaged in practices are motivated to actually do the job well, not just look like they are doing it well. They are motivated to be honest with themselves and others.*

*Practices help people to find meaning in life. Meaning in life, according to philosopher Mary Midgley “begins from the group one belongs to having a satisfactory communal life, and then the individual achieving [in that community] whatever aims are currently most needed and valued.”<sup>47</sup> People engaged in practices integrate their sense of self with a set of activities that a social group has defined and declared worthwhile. Being a fine chef, musician, farmer, teacher, or scientist becomes part of the way the individual conceives of himself. It enters (with-*

out necessarily dominating) the narrative or story that the individual tells about his life. Excellence in the chosen area becomes one of his goals in life and progress toward that goal is one area of activity that gives his life meaning.

*Meaning often increases with faith in the practice's goals and future.* Midgley equates faith with "the sense of having one's place within a whole greater than oneself, one whose larger aims so enclose one's own and give them point that sacrifice for it can be entirely proper."<sup>48</sup> Engaging in a practice often elicits such faith. Imagine a doctor who not only gains internal satisfaction from contributing to the health of her patients, but sees her work of information gathering as contributing to improved health care in the future. Midgley notes: "Even in quite unpretentious groups such as trades or professions, there is often a strong sense of a greater purpose transcending individual wishes, a purpose which carries everyone forward and which all must serve."<sup>49</sup>

Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez make the same point: "It's fairly easy to know what fulfillment is in terms of food or other temporary pleasures," they write. "But to have fulfillment in the larger sense, to have a fulfilled life, you need to have a sense of purpose, a dream of what a good life might be."<sup>50</sup> They tell a story about three stonecutters to illustrate purpose, which they define as "the meaning you give to actions."

A passerby approaches the first stonecutter and asks, "Excuse me, what are you doing?" The stonecutter replies rather gruffly, "Can't you see? I'm chipping away at this big hunk of stone." Approaching the second craftsman, our curious person asks the same question. This stonecutter looks up with a mixture of pride and resignation and says, "Why, I'm earning a living to take care of my wife and children." Moving to the third worker, our questioner asks, "And what are *you* doing?" The third stonecutter looks up, his face shining, and says with reverence, "I'm building a cathedral!"<sup>51</sup>

### *Looking for Love*

*Motivation by lofty ideals not only gets the job done, but contributes more than external rewards to a sense of meaning and personal fulfillment. Love, family and community are also essential for human flourishing, but are unattainable principally through external motivation. This, too, is part of human nature. Dave Ramsey writes:*

A workaholic gerbil in a wheel invented the stupid phrase "quality time." There is no question that quantity time is what is needed to develop strong fruitful relationships. We are failing miserably in this culture by not slowing down enough to enjoy each other. . . .

When I was growing up in the sixties, my mom would often be at a neighbor's kitchen table having a cup of coffee at midmorning while the kids played. . . . The evenings would find half the neighborhood gathered on a deck or patio to enjoy a night of interaction. We camped together, the men fished together, and as a kid



you could get your butt busted by any adult in the neighborhood. There was a real sense of community.

What has stolen our ability to find those luxurious hours to invest in family and friends? Several things have stolen that time. We are so marketed to that we have started to believe that more stuff will make us happy. But in this country, more stuff has resulted in more debt. What debt means is that we end up spending our every waking hour working to pay off our bills.<sup>52</sup>

Robin and Dominguez echo this view:

It would seem that the primary "thing" many people have sacrificed in "going for the gold" is their relationships with other people. Whether you think of that as a happy marriage, time with the children, neighborliness, a close circle of friends, shopkeepers who know you, civic involvement, community spirit, or just living in a place where you can walk to work and the beat cop is your friend, it's disappearing across the country.<sup>53</sup>

What is more, much of the stuff we buy separates us from one another. Ramsey cites a study showing that "the typical house in 1960 was 1,375 square feet, 1 story, with 3 bedrooms and 1.5 baths while the typical house in the 1990s is 1,940 square feet, 2 stories, 4 bedrooms, and 2.5 baths."<sup>54</sup> Because family size has not increased, each family member now has more room at home. Now children are less likely to share a bedroom, and the single-occupancy bedroom is more likely to contain its own television, stereo, and computer (with software for games). This tempts children to stay isolated in their rooms. In 1960, most houses had only one television and no computer.

Other aspects of affluence also contribute to social isolation. Most houses built before World War II had front porches, which were the coolest places to be on hot summer days. Neighbors would converse from porch to porch, especially in urban and suburban areas where houses were closer together than is typical today. Now larger lawns and yards separate houses and central air conditioning keeps people indoors during hot weather. *Much of our stuff contributes to a loss of community.*

The resulting loss of a sense of connection with others sets the stage for a vicious circle. Increased consumerism weakens personal bonds that people need to feel whole and good about themselves. Influenced in part by advertising people try to compensate for feelings of emptiness through higher incomes and more purchases. Alfie Kohn notes: "As a number of psychologists and social critics have argued, when a sense of meaning or deep connection to others is absent . . . from one's life: a plump bank account is made to substitute for authentic fulfillment."<sup>55</sup> Additional work hours away from friends and family are needed to build that bank account and pay for stuff. This increases the sense of isolation and emptiness, so people buy even more, and so on. Kohn adds:

That we are dealing with a substitute satisfaction here seems clear from the fact that no sum ever suffices: such people always "need" more than they are currently

making—or buying. Add one more pair of shoes, a new electronic gizmo, or a higher salary, . . . and it is still not enough. It is never enough.<sup>56</sup>

Such *compulsive consumerism harms the environment and frustrates people. Here, too, what is bad for nature is also bad for people.* Alan Durning writes that for most people “the main determinants of happiness in life . . . are satisfaction with family life, especially marriage, followed by satisfaction with work, leisure to develop talents, and friendships.”<sup>57</sup> *So people would fare better with a sense of connection to one another and to nature than with high-consumption life styles that degrade the environment.*

Of course, people cannot ignore money altogether. In our society we need money to live. But *those who want to flourish need to examine their relationships to money and consumer goods to find the best path toward personal fulfillment.* Almost always, Robin and Dominguez argue, that path will involve less money, fewer purchases, and a lighter burden on ecosystems. Let us examine their views.

### *Your Money or Your Life*

Robin and Dominguez say that we get the most out of life when we have fulfilling work and meaningful relationships. Working for money interferes with leading such a life when it channels our limited time and energy to less internally rewarding tasks. So most people can improve their lives by reducing their need for money. We should aim at maximum fulfillment from each expenditure. This requires developing an internal yardstick that shows when we have had just enough of something. They write:

Being fulfilled is having just enough. Think about it. Whether it's food or money or things, if you don't know, from an internal standard, what is enough, then you will pass directly from “not enough” to “too much”. . . . Having an internal yardstick for fulfillment is actually one part of what we call Financial Integrity. You learn to make your financial choices independently of what advertising and industry have decided would be good for their business. You are free of the humiliation of being manipulated into spending your life energy on things that don't bring you fulfillment.<sup>58</sup>

They suggest beginning the discovery of what is enough by organizing expenditures into categories. This helps people whose paychecks seem to disappear without a trace get a realistic picture of where their money is going. The categories include such things as transportation, clothing, groceries, travel, and so forth. Robin and Dominguez tell the story of a man who could not account for 20 percent of his income until he discovered that he had a penchant for buying shoes:

He had golf shoes, tennis shoes, running shoes, boating shoes, walking shoes, hiking shoes and climbing shoes, as well as cross-country-ski shoes, downhill-ski boots

and after-ski boots. Just having a category for shoes helped him find some of that missing income—and face the fact that he rarely wore anything but comfortable around-the-house shoes. He wasn't alone in his shoe fetish. . . . Eighty percent of the athletic shoes in this country are never used for the activity for which they've been designed.<sup>59</sup>

Robin and Dominguez have a term for the kinds of items we tend to buy without thinking clearly about fulfillment. They call them gazingus pins:

A gazingus pin is any item that you just can't pass by without buying. Everybody has them. They run the gamut from pocket calculators and tiny screwdrivers to pens and chocolate kisses. So there you are in the mall, a shopping robot on your weekly tour of the stations of the crass. You come to the gazingus-pin section and your mind starts cranking out gazingus-pin thoughts: Oh, there's a pink one . . . I don't have a pink one . . . Oh, that one runs on solar cells . . . That would be handy . . . My, a waterproof one . . . If I don't use it I can always give it away. . . .<sup>60</sup>

The result is a waste of money and clutter in the home. Robin and Dominguez recommend discovering what your gazingus pins are and avoiding them.

They make other suggestions for saving money as well. Here are a few examples that point in the right direction. Avoid credit card debt:

You pay from 16 percent to over 20 percent interest on your credit card debt. That's like working a five-day week and getting paid for four. If your employer announced such a downward revision in salaries, you and your coworkers would be up in arms. People who see debt as endless and just pay down as little as possible are actually opting for that lower income.<sup>61</sup>

Here is another idea. Do not go shopping unless there is a specific item you have decided you want and need. Robin and Dominguez write:

About 53 percent of groceries and 47 percent of hardware-store purchases are "spur of the moment." When 34,300 mall shoppers across the country were asked the primary reason for their visit, only 25 percent said they had come in pursuit of a specific item. About 70 percent of all adults visit a regional mall weekly.<sup>62</sup>

Other suggestions include taking care of what you have, using what you have until it is worn out, anticipating your needs so you can buy needed items when they are on sale, comparison shopping by telephone, and buying things used.

I would add vegetarianism, or at least reduced meat consumption, to the list. It saves money, makes it easier to control weight, improves the diet of most Americans, enables more people to be fed from diminishing supplies of good topsoil and fresh water, leaves more uncultivated land for use by other species, and reduces the cruel treatment of animals. *People whose reasons to reduce meat consumption, or become vegetarians, include concern about other species illustrate environmental synergy. People and nature are better off due to (at least some aspects of) nature being valued for itself.*

Robin and Dominguez give about 100 tips for **frugality**. “Frugality,” they write:

is . . . getting good *value* for every minute of your life energy and from everything you *have the use of*. . . . Waste lies not in the number of possessions but in the failure to enjoy them. . . . To be frugal means to have a high joy-to-stuff ratio. If you get one unit of joy for each material possession, that’s frugal. But if you need ten possessions to even begin registering on the joy meter, you’re missing the point of being alive.<sup>63</sup>

And you can’t take it with you, Dave Ramsey points out: “He with the most toys when he dies is dead. . . . You never see a Ryder truck following a hearse.”<sup>64</sup>

*Because frugal people get more bang for the buck, they need fewer bucks to have fulfilling lives.* So they may be able to pass up a distasteful job for one they find more satisfying; or they may work for money only part-time; or they may retire early. The key, write Robin and Dominguez, is to separate in your mind productive work from paid employment. *Financial freedom enables people to follow their dreams and be productive to their greatest capacity with diminished concern about pay.* Such people can work for grand causes they believe in, volunteer in local organizations, or spend more time with family, friends, and neighbors.

Of course, frugal people may reduce paid employment opportunities for others. *When consumer demand diminishes, fewer paid workers are needed.* Alan Durning quotes Harvard economist Juliet Schor, who wrote in *The Overworked American*:

Since 1948, the level of productivity of the U.S. worker has more than doubled. In other words, we could now produce our 1948 standard of living in less than half the time. Every time productivity increases, we are presented with the possibility of either more free time or more money. We could have chosen the four-hour day. Or a working year of six months. Or every worker in the United States could now be taking every other year off from work—with pay.<sup>65</sup>

These same choices exist when fewer worker hours are needed due to declining consumer demand. However, unlike the lifestyle choices discussed above, these societal arrangements are not choices people can make individually. Employment policies affect these matters. The next chapter discusses these and other policies.

This chapter concludes with observations by Robin and Dominguez that support environmental synergism:

Your health, your pocketbook and the environment have a mutually enhancing relationship. If you do something good for one, it’s almost always good for the other two. If you walk or bicycle to work to reduce your contribution to greenhouse gases you are also saving money and getting great exercise at the same time. If you compost your kitchen scraps to improve your soil (the environment) you are also improving the quality of your vegetables (your health)—and saving money on your garbage bill. . . .

It isn't just an odd coincidence that saving money and saving the planet are connected. In fact, in some sense your money *is* the planet. Here's how.

Money is a lien on earth's resources. Every time we spend money on anything, we are consuming not only the metal, plastic, wood or other material in the item itself, but also all the resources it took to extract these from the earth, transport them to the manufacturer, process them, assemble the product, ship it to the retailer and bring it from the store to your home. . . .<sup>66</sup>

*Synergists claim that valuing nature for itself, which motivates reducing our exploitation of it, is generally necessary for the best human life. Critics of synergism may think that reducing our consumption to lessen our environmental impact detracts from the quality of human life. This chapter answers critics by claiming that less consumption by middle-class people enhances human life. Caring about biodiversity for itself, goes together with saving money and increasing personal fulfillment. That is synergy.*

### Judgment Calls

- Journalist Douglas Martin reported in *The New York Times Sunday* that inventor and manufacturer Gregg A. Miller is doing a booming business selling artificial testicles for pets. Some pet owners who have their animals neutered want that natural look, and Mr. Miller claims that neutered pets need artificial testicles to avoid "post-neutering trauma." What do you think?<sup>67</sup>
- We saw in Chapter 3 that Mark Sagoff makes a distinction between our roles as citizens and as consumers. He contends that consumer choices are unaffected by ideals about what is needed to make the world a better place. He claims to drive a car with an "Ecology Now" sticker on it that leaks oil wherever it is parked. How does this chapter relate to his views?
- Ecologist Aldo Leopold suggests that human nature makes some personal choices more satisfying than others. He writes that young children "do not tremble when they are shown a golf ball, but I should not like to own the boy whose hair does not lift his hat when he sees his first deer."<sup>68</sup> What effect might this observation reasonably have on parents who are helping their children develop values that will guide consumer choices?
- My wife and I both need cars, in part because bicycling after dark is dangerous where we live. How might the government expand transportation possibilities so that we would have more choices and would need, perhaps, only one car?
- Poor workers in Third World countries make most of the sports shoes that would go unsold if people in the United States started buying only the shoes they really needed. How might our knowledge of this work force reasonably affect consumer choices in our country? (See the next chapter for more on government policies and globalization.)