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Consuming Because Others Consume

To a large extent, people consume because those around them do. This is a familiar thesis, borne out by a variety of social phenomena. Why it should be so is another question. In modern societies, consumption is usually understood as a form of competition, in which the prizes are status and superiority. This view has been cited almost to tedium ever since Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899. It is a sign of Veblen's enduring influence that the notion of "consuming because others consume" makes us think, first of all, of conspicuous consumption: of keeping up with the Joneses, displays of wealth, and an excessive reliance on material goods as a way of attaining status. Just the idea that there is a relational aspect to consumption evokes a world in which everyone is trying to outdo everyone else — a world where, in Veblen's words, people accumulate goods in order to "rank high in comparison with the rest of the community."

Veblen himself, in describing such practices, insisted that he was not passing judgment upon them. When, for example, he gave the name "invidious comparison" to the act of "rating and grading" persons on the basis of their relative worth, he hastened to add, "there is no intention to extol or depreciate, or to commend or deplore any of the phenomena which the word is used to characterize." But whether Veblen meant to "depreciate" or not, that is certainly the way his words have been taken. The recognition that people consume because others consume, and that they judge others by their material possessions, is usually tinged with disapproval or even contempt.

I shall argue that although we do often consume because others do, this fact cannot be understood solely in terms of a desire for superior status. In some cases, the pursuit of status is involved, but what is sought is equality rather than superiority. In other cases, status considerations are wholly irrelevant.

If this view is right — if consumption is largely relational, but in a more complex way than has often been supposed — two conclusions follow. The first relates to our moral assessment of consumption choices and

what they indicate about human nature. The idea that people consume because others do has led many observers to conclude that people are fundamentally sheeplike, greedy, or shallow, or that they are continually engaged in trying to outdo their neighbors. Although it may be inappropriate to discount these traits altogether, an appreciation of the complexities of consumption shows that it is often rational, reasonable, and respectable for a person to consume when others do. More generally, an appreciation of the extent to which consumption is relational helps us to understand certain puzzles about human desires and well-being.

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The second conclusion is practical. To the extent that a person consumes because others do, she could consume less if others did too without diminishing her well-being. It follows that our usual hand-wringing about how much we can reasonably ask people to limit their consumption — in order to prevent irreparable harm to the environment, to allow for a more just distribution of resources, or to promote a less materialistic way of life — is exaggerated and beside the point. Reductions in consumption, when effected in a concerted way, need not involve deprivation in the sense generally envisioned. It is not a matter of "sacrificing because others sacrifice," but rather of not having to sacrifice when material consumption falls collectively.

The Relativity of Absolute Well-Being

Of course, people's desires for and consumption of things are not always dependent on what others have. Certain basic needs or minimum requirements — the

need to consume a certain number of calories, or to have clothing and shelter against the elements — exist independently of other people's actions or possessions. Even biological needs, however, are not wholly independent of context or circumstance. In a society in which strenuous physical activity is important — because the acquisition of necessities requires strength or speed, or because such activity is for some other reason socially valued — a person might need a larger caloric intake to function effectively or well. To the extent that all people have a basic need for enough food to survive or thrive, we can say that the need is absolute. But how much food is enough to survive or thrive will vary depending on circumstances.

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Certain needs — for example, the need for air — are quite nonrelative. But think, by contrast, of the need to get around and do things — to travel to one's workplace, or to visit markets where food and the like are available. In some societies, the need to get around is minimal; all work and market activities may be performed a few yards, at most a few miles, from one's door. In many contemporary communities, however, workplaces and markets are widely dispersed, and it may be difficult or impossible to reach them without private transportation. A car becomes a virtual necessity; indeed, for a suburban or rural family, one car may not be enough.

Obviously, the need for a car is not absolute in the sense of existing independent of context. The economic system and the infrastructure could have evolved differently, producing a well-functioning system of public transportation that makes it possible or even preferable to ride buses and trains. This suggests one sense in which consumption is relational. Where others take buses, there will be buses, available to all, and I will have less need for a car. The obvious choice, in that case, will be to do what others do. Where no such system exists, I may still do what others do — but now the activity we have in common will be driving.

Notice, however, that under these circumstances, my desire for a car — although dependent on what other people have and do — need not be rooted in greed, envy, or the desire for status. Of course, cars have acquired a great deal of significance apart from their utility; I may want a particular kind of car to express something about myself or to prove my status. But these motives could be entirely absent and I might still have reason to want a car. Similarly, many items

once thought of as high-tech luxuries — television, cable television, computers, on-line databases — are becoming increasingly necessary for the citizen in a technologically sophisticated society.

The Entrenchment of the New

Sometimes, no doubt, it is an exaggeration to say (as advertisers typically do) that a particular item has moved from the status of luxury to necessity. Still, new goods often become entrenched in a society — become more needlike — in a subtle and interesting process. We can observe this transformation with respect to many recent innovations: answering machines, VCRs, electronic mail. When first introduced, such items may appear frivolous, at least to those not mesmerized by gadgets. Gradually — but really very quickly — even the skeptics start to notice their uses.

For example, while the benefits to owners of answering machines were immediately apparent, some callers at first found the devices awkward or even insulting. Soon, however, even the insulted callers began to recognize advantages to themselves: not having to call back repeatedly when no one answered, avoiding unwanted prolonged conversations. Complaints about "talking to a machine" are rarely heard anymore. Similarly, car phones, which when first introduced were widely viewed as mere status symbols, are now recognized as convenient and even safety-enhancing (in a dangerous world of carjackings and other crimes).

How does this phenomenon bear on the relational aspects of consumption? Acquisition of a good by many people can render it more necessary, even if it doesn't always become a "necessity." In the case of electronic mail and on-line databases, for example, we have what economists call networking effects: someone lacking the service is made worse off by being isolated from the flow of information. Even the humdrum answering machine can affect how people conduct business, so that those lacking one may suffer disadvantages themselves and also inconvenience others. When most people have answering machines, it might be reasonable to ask someone to make a dozen phone calls, on the assumption that messages can be left if no one answers. The person without an answering machine forces the messenger to work harder by calling repeatedly, and is more likely not to be reached at all. For a business owner whose frustrated callers turn to alternative providers, the result may be not just inconvenience, but a lost livelihood.

Salient Things

The process by which new goods get entrenched in a culture bears in another way on the relational aspects

BETWEEN BEING AND NOTHINGNESS



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of consumption: the acquisition of goods by others serves as a crucial form of publicity. Leaving aside for the moment questions about status and competition, the fact that one's friends and neighbors have something new acts as a stimulus if the good has intrinsic appeal of any kind. Advertisers have always been fully aware of this phenomenon, which can be understood in terms of what cognitive psychologists call "salience." The physical presence of an item, or the vividness and persistence of its image, makes it more available to consciousness.

In our zeal to find deep explanations for the desire to raise one's level of material well-being, we have neglected this simple yet powerful effect. It stands to reason that a person is more likely to want something if he sees other people possessing and making use of it. Familiarity breeds desire more often than contempt. Moreover, this desire-stimulating process seems perfectly respectable, as plausibly attributable to human curiosity, to being alive to one's surroundings, as to greed or envy or status-seeking — the explanations most commonly offered by critics of consumption.

Some might argue, on the contrary, that this fact about human beings is precisely what terms like "greed" and "envy" are meant to denote — wanting things when you see them, being moved by the consumption habits of others. How to resolve this dispute, where both sides agree on the evidence but disagree about its meaning? One solution is to have it both ways: to acknowledge an element that is morally neutral or even praiseworthy (curiosity, aliveness to one's surroundings), but also an element worthy of criticism (lack of self-sufficiency, overdependence on material things). Yet whether moral criticism is appropriate depends partly on other issues that await resolution.

Consumption and Self-Respect

We have now seen two reasons why consumption is relational. First, a society's way of life or infrastructure may make the satisfaction of needs most people would agree are basic dependent on imitating other people's consumption practices. And second, acquaintance breeds desire: it is not necessarily a sign of greed or envy to want things when you see them.

This is not to deny that other desires may play an important role in the urge to consume. We want to have things, and to have others know we have them, in part in order to say something about ourselves to others. Sometimes, the self-expression achieved through our consumption choices may not be directed to other people. Someone who drives a Jeep Cherokee — or, at the other extreme, someone who rides a battered bicycle — may simply be enacting a role for his own pleasure, without regard to his public image or his status in a hierarchical order. Let us assume, however, that for most people such forms of self-expression as fashion do include a crucial communicative component — and, more specifically, that people sometimes aim to communicate something about their worth.

Such status-seeking has a bad reputation. A long tradition of moralists advises that what other people think is not important, that we should not base our actions on the opinions of others. And it is easy to describe situations where one *shouldn't* care what others think — where, for instance, there is a right thing to do, and one must brave public opinion and do it. Yet it seems too sweeping a judgment to say that it is always wrong to care. The person wholly unconcerned with how others see her seems at best too saintly to serve as a model for the ordinary person; at worst, she may be pathological, or unjustly contemptuous of other people.

Though it is true that a person may consume in order to show that he is better than others, he may also consume simply to show that he is as good as others.

There is a second reason to temper our judgment of consumption that sends a message to others. For though it is true that a person may consume in order to show that he is better than others, he may also consume simply to show that he is as good as others. This distinction, which Veblen failed to draw, seems both morally significant and psychologically real. In its most basic form, the desire to be *as good as* others is a desire for self-respect. I believe that this kind of self-respect, and the respect from others it implies, is a fundamental human need; a person cannot have a decent life without it.

The satisfaction of the need for self-respect calls for a certain kind of equality, which means in part having certain things that others have. Adam Smith articulated this point — and its connection with consumption practices — two centuries ago, and his formulation has not been surpassed:

By necessities I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably, though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, no body can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them.

As his reference to “custom” suggests, Smith understood that while the need for self-respect — or, put negatively, the need to avoid shame — is basic and universal, what it takes to satisfy that need varies widely from time to time and place to place. Wherever there is material or technological progress, new goods will gradually assume the role of “signifying decency” that Smith describes. This is not to say that in less dynamic societies no goods play this role, but only that the relevant goods in such societies are less often superseded. Technological progress, combined with the need for self-respect, tends to up the consumption ante.

This of course raises the question: *how much* equality does self-respect require? One might argue that all significant material inequalities are damaging to the self-respect of those who have less, and thus that the only effective guarantee of self-respect is radical egalitarianism. My own claim is more limited. Reasonable people will disagree over whether material inequalities *generally* undermine self-respect, and about how damaging inequalities are. My point has been only that the absence of certain — circumscribed — goods undermines self-respect, and that it is therefore reasonable for people to want those goods when others have them.

Ability-Signaling in a Competitive World

Sometimes, then, the expressive function of consumption is to affirm “decency” and self-respect. But having or owning certain things is a means of conveying other status-related messages as well. The economist Robert Frank observes that in all human societies, “Many of the most important decisions ever made about us depend on how strangers see our talents, abilities, and other characteristics.” Because the assessment of these characteristics is “a subtle and complicated task,” people look to consumption goods as signals of ability. For example, if a potential client knows that “good lawyers generally earn a lot of money,” and that “people with a lot of money generally drive

fashionable new cars," he will assume that a lawyer driving a battered car "is not much sought after." Such a client is likely to take his business elsewhere.

Notice, however, that when consumption serves to signal abilities, the distinction between consuming to demonstrate one is as good as others and consuming to show one is better — and between either of these and consuming simply to convey information — begins to blur. Insofar as a person is attempting to convey information about his abilities, he is saying, "I have these traits, these talents, I am *this* good . . . so hire me." His consumption serves the useful function of providing information about himself. But he is also trying, in a competitive world, to obtain a scarce commodity.

Similar complexities may arise in any competitive setting. It seems clear, for example, that many consumption choices — including consumption of non-material goods such as education — are motivated by situations where, if you don't move ahead, you fall behind. In such cases, the decision *not* to acquire more of a particular good is not simply a decision not to improve one's well-being; it is in effect a decision to lower it. When high school diplomas are a dime a dozen, employers will start to require college degrees; even if the additional education is not necessary to do the job, it serves as a sorting device. When college degrees are a dime a dozen, employers will require MBAs or law degrees. As Fred Hirsch puts it, when everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees any better. But

Rising Consumption, Unchanging Needs

According to many commentators, one of the central dynamics of mass consumption societies is a constant escalation in our sense of what we need. Advertising and emulation of others, it is argued, play a key role in the never-ending inflation in our conception of what constitutes decent food, clothing, housing, and so forth.

However, in trying to understand how and why levels and patterns of consumption have changed over time, we would do well to consider a second hypothesis: that much of the rise in our consumption expenditures has simply gone towards meeting the same needs we have always had — needs for safe housing, transportation to work, care of children, and so on — but that the real cost of meeting these constant needs has grown.

To see how this might occur, consider a fundamental need that applies to every family: the need to live in a safe neighborhood. In the United States, the decay of urban centers and the growth of urban street crime has meant that, for many people, the need for safe housing can only be met if they move to the suburbs or to a few select neighborhoods. In response to increased demand, housing prices in these areas have gone up. In turn, transportation costs have risen for people who must now get

around in and to and from suburban neighborhoods. Over the past sixty years, the amount that Americans spend on transportation has increased about 600 percent in real terms. Much of this increased spending should not be viewed as luxury spending or even as an escalation of standards; it simply reflects the higher cost of meeting an unchanging set of legitimate needs.

Clearly, the need for safe housing presents not so much a construction problem as a social reclamation problem — one that goes to the issues of crime, unemployment, and the deterioration of public schools; of urban decay and institutionalized racism. Acquiring the resources to address such issues, however, may well require more, not less, economic growth. In countries such as our own, isolated individuals, through heroic personal efforts, may find their way to the simple life. However, to reopen the possibility of simple living for the population as a whole, major public investment and a complex social agenda may be required.

— Jerome M. Segal

if you don't stand on tiptoe, you won't see at all. Before long, people who want to see better will be getting stilts. But if *everyone* gets stilts. . . . It is difficult to say, in such cases, whether the buyer of stilts is merely trying to remain equal, or aiming for superiority.

Changing the World

In offering an account of the relational aspects of consumption, I have not addressed the question of ~~whether we ought to consume less~~. Partly as a result, this discussion may seem to have an ambiguous, "half-empty or half-full?" quality. Looked at one way, it might appear to be an apology for consumption; looked at in another, it seems a call for a simpler life. It looks like the first because in explaining the relativity of consumption practices I have also been defending these practices to some extent. It looks like the second because the questions raised get their force from the assumption that consumption is somehow problematic.

Both impressions have some warrant. Certainly, I have offered at least a partial defense of those who "consume because others consume" — a defense against the charges of conformity, greed, envy, or one-upmanship. I have argued that the desire to consume rests partly on factors that have nothing at all to do with status, and that even the desire for status is not always reprehensible — that we consume partly to satisfy the desire for a certain kind of equality that is essential to self-respect. However, the fact that people are found to behave in a certain way or to possess certain traits (assuming they do) does not amount to a justification. Even if my account of our motives for consumption is accurate, it does not entitle us to commit the "naturalistic fallacy" — to move illicitly from "is" to "ought." Maybe we should conclude from the evidence not that consumption is defensible, but rather that human beings are contemptible or at least morally weak.

To some extent this issue will remain immune to rational solution. When all is said there will still be serious disagreements about how much we can or should expect of human beings. Such disagreements are rooted partly in disputes about or ignorance of psychological facts, and partly in evaluative issues. One person's greed is another's openness to new experiences, and it is not easy to see what further information could get them to see eye to eye. Their contrasting views do not depend on divergent factual beliefs, but rather on differing judgments about the moral value of certain character traits or behavior. Similar things can be said about equality and self-respect. To what extent should we purge ourselves of needing things and other people's approval? How important is self-sufficiency as a moral ideal? There can be no simple answer to these questions.

For myself, a middle way seems reasonable. On the one hand, what we count as a virtue must take heed of human psychology; if the great mass of people cannot thrive or be happy without a certain degree of respect from their fellows, then it is at best only the remotest kind of virtue, fit for the very few, to go without it. With regard both to things and to people, too much self-sufficiency is eerily inhuman and remote. On the other hand, too little self-sufficiency is slavish. It is for this reason, among others, that I take the foregoing arguments to constitute only a partial defense of human character. We are made to respond to the stimuli around us, and to care about the opinions of others; but that doesn't mean that we don't often care more than we should. We do.

Similarly, I have conceded that quite trivial things sometimes improve one's well-being, which to some will seem heresy enough; and I have of course argued that one is often better off having things when others do. But all this is perfectly compatible with the view that, overall, we would be better off with fewer things, better off if things and the thought of them dominated our lives less.

Of course, we worry about consumption for other reasons as well: because it seems wrong for some to have so much while others have so little, or because we think that those who have so much are partly to blame for others' having too little. Insofar as we worry about consumption for these reasons — reasons of justice — or for environmental reasons, consuming less could make a big difference. To know whether it would for certain would require us to analyze these reasons carefully. My purpose here has been to show why changes in our consumption habits, if effected collectively, might be less traumatic than those of us who have become accustomed to a certain level of material comfort might suppose.

— Judith Lichtenberg

Sources: Amartya Sen, "Poor, Relatively Speaking," *Oxford Economic Papers* (New Series), vol. 35 (1983); James Duesenberry, *Income, Saving, and the Theory of Consumer Behavior* (Harvard University Press, 1949); Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Dover, 1994); Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, originally published 1776 (Modern Library, 1937); Robert Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (Oxford University Press, 1985); Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Harvard University Press, 1976).