


A Simple Solute for Simple Living

  
Philosophy 150 (Ned Hettinger)

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Ned

Growing up in the eighties, I am a product of perhaps the most materialistic, consumption oriented era of our American history. I come from a two-income household in which my parents worked endlessly to move from poor to middle class status. All the gains of their efforts were realized by having the latest item on the market or improving upon what they had. Although some values of frugality were impressed upon me, I too aspired to have "stuff." I entered the full time workforce as soon as I turned 18 and quickly learned to disdain long work hours. When I achieved a position where I could afford it, I spent all my extra income on acquiring possessions. Ironically, the acquiring of possessions did not lesson my disdain for all the work I had to do to purchase them. No matter how much stuff I got, I always wanted more.

I decided to better my life by going to college at age 21. This made my life even more time constrained and stressful, but I was determined that it would get better if I got an education and a better job. Then I met Sue. I worked in her salon and quickly realized she was infamous for her frugality. As I got to know her, I began to admire how content and satisfied she seemed to be with her life. Her house was simple and uncluttered. She had time for things like gardening, church, volunteer work, travel and classes. She was thoughtful of others, loved nature and expressed concern for the environment.

It wasn't until I moved to Charleston that I truly appreciated these things about Sue. I entered the college here and have been very successful. I began to take on more and more work. I have worked 3 jobs at a time in order to have money to buy the things that made me feel like I fit in with the higher social class here. I took a teacher's assistant position as well as a position as a research assistant in my department. My future was looking bright. I fit in with the right people; I made the right connections. I worked hard and I had good grades. I looked to be published before I even finished my undergraduate degree. I had money; I had stuff. I wasn't

happy. I had no time. I fell into debt from the endless spending. I felt like I didn't even have time to be myself. I was tired all the time. I knew all of this consumption was bad for the environment. I would think of Sue and wistfully wish for life to just slow down. I began to ask myself if all of this was really worth it. This is how I became interested in voluntary simplicity.

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My feeling of disillusionment with the American dream is obviously shared among many others. I base this judgment on the plethora of information and books written recently on the subject. My preliminary research revealed more sources than I could examine in several years, let alone within the time constraints of this project. There were a handful of sources which appeared prominently, including Jerome Segal's *Graceful Simplicity*, Robin and Dominguez *Your Money or Your Life*, Juliet Schor's *The Overspent American*, Duane Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity* and Cecile Andrews' *The Circle of Simplicity*. Of these, I chose to examine the last as a matter of the repeated references to it and of availability. Andrews' book turned out to be one of great practical and philosophical insight.

First I think it is important to define what voluntary simplicity is and what it is not. This is especially true as it seems as though many view this movement as a dropping out of society. It conjures up images of loners living in isolated, rural environments, rejecting technology and hippies living in communes and preaching "down with the establishment." This is not simple living. Many people have shunned the movement because they believe it is just too radical; it's not practical or applicable to the average Joe.

There are several core values of the simplicity movement. As Jerome Segal points out, "there is no single politics of simple living" (Segal 1996). One of the central ideas is doing more with less. This means finding ways of fulfilling our true needs while rushing less, working less and spending less. One way in which Andrews defines this is "questioning the standard definitions that equate success with money and prestige and the accumulation of things" (Andrews xiv). As I will discuss later, the impacts of fulfilling our needs materialistically and defining success in the aforementioned manner has negative consequences for the individual, for society and for the

efficiency

environment. This brings us to another central idea of simplicity; if we are not having our needs met in the capitalistic manner, how will they be met? The voluntary simplicity movement embraces the idea of seeking out activities that are meaningful, insightful and beneficial to society and the environment. Andrews says that people on this path are "searching for ways that help them feel excited about life when they awake each morning, ways that help them find joy in the moment, a sense of purpose in their work, ways that help them feel a sense of connection with all of life" (Andrews xv). Other ways of defining this are "living consciously," "defining [your] own standard of success and prosperity, community and fun" and "surrounding yourself with what really brings you fulfillment" (Andrews xv). By reducing work time and consumption, the simplicity movement hopes to create more equitable distribution of jobs, income and resources. The resulting increase in leisure time allows for more time for contemplation, play, rest, civic engagement, spiritual endeavors and fosters a greater general caring for one another.

Reducing consumption also reduces our impact on the environment and stretches our resources. The ideology of simplicity also embraces the idea of living with less technology in order to reduce spending, environmental impact, and to get more in touch with life and each other. The simplist would most likely agree with Wendell Berry's criteria for technological innovation (Berry 1996). The new tool should be cheaper than and at least as small as the one it replaces. It should do better work, use less energy and use soft energy if possible. It should be repairable by the lay person, purchasable close to home at a small, private shop and not replace anything good that already exists, especially where family and community are concerned. This is also a central idea of simplicity, re-establishing community ties and eliminating things that obstruct them.

Voluntary simplicity does not have to mean dramatic changes in the way we live our lives. Rather, it only requires an increase in awareness of how we live our lives. Once this is achieved, other changes will naturally follow. We do not have to throw away our TV's, but if we are finding other ways of fulfilling our needs, we will not be so compelled to watch TV. We do not

have to curtail every bit of our spending, but when we are happy with what we have, the desire for more is naturally eliminated. Yes, it is true that some people have made dramatic changes. Take, for example, Peter Mui of Berkeley, California. He quit a \$75,000 a year job, rides a bicycle and lives on \$16,000-\$20,000 a year and is much happier. This however, is unnecessary. The idea is that if we change our philosophy of what constitutes the good life, get back to what is really important, and reduce our work time, the clay will be soft, so to speak, and ready for us to mold in whatever fashion our free will should choose.

Cecile Andrews suggests, and I concur, that the American dream has turned into the American nightmare. Our ideas of finding happiness in a house with a two-car garage (with automatic door opener), a white picket fence (and top of the line security system) and a dog in the yard (perfectly manicured and of the finest quality grass just like our neighbor has), has caused many symptoms which Andrews identifies as a sleeping sickness of the soul (3). These symptoms include working longer hours than ever before, always rushing, having no time for loved ones, not getting enough rest, depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, boredom, watching too much TV and ignorantly or apathetically damaging the environment (3-9). Americans are among the greediest, most materialistic and most competitive people in the world.

According to a report by Richens and Dawson for the *Journal of Consumer Research*, we do not generally regard materialism as a good quality, yet we continue to behave in a materialistic manner. People identify themselves with their belongings. John Doe feels cool in his new car, he feels worthy of the attention of others in his expensive clothes, his expensive furniture will surely impress his high ranking associates at the lavish dinner party he intends to host. We live in a culture that places material possessions at the center of our lives. As stated in Richens' and Dawson's article, "when a large portion of a society avidly desires to consume goods for reasons that economists have traditionally defined as nonutilitarian, a 'consumer culture' is said to exist." Possessions have become "essential to satisfaction and well-being" (Richens and Dawson 1992). The article also concludes that materialistic people are self-centered since an overriding concern

with possessions and acquisition for oneself is inherently incompatible with sharing and giving to others. Richens and Dawson point out that materialists are linked with a reliance on technology and unconcern for the environment. They use empirical tests to ~~prove~~ support the hypothesis that the materialist always has a desire for more and lives in a cycle of dissatisfaction and discontent. They found a negative correlation between materialism and self-esteem.

It is unclear whether dissatisfaction causes materialism or vice versa. Jerome Segal provides an interesting chain reaction which resolves this question and which I tend to agree with (Segal 1999). He explains that we have an underlying need for self-esteem. I think this is a quality of basic human nature. Our self-esteem is somewhat connected to how others perceive us, thus self-esteem becomes a need to be seen by others as valuable. We tend to find a group of people whose judgment matters to us and desire to be seen as valuable by this group. This group will inevitably have a set of norms, consumption patterns included, and failure to live up to these norms causes feelings of inadequacy. Now our self-esteem becomes a need to meet the consumption norms of the group we associate with. If this group values acquiring possessions then our own self-esteem becomes dependent on acquiring possessions and earning enough money to do so.

Our capitalistic society has capitalized on this web of cause and effect. Marketers are aware of the basic human need for self-esteem and the ways in which this need may be met. The people in advertisements look so happy. We want to identify with them; we want to be happy like they are. Our neighbors seem happier because of their product. Our friends have their product and we want to be accepted by our friends. It is so much quicker and requires so much less thought to increase our self-esteem by purchasing these products than to ask ourselves what truly makes us happy.

Some people may argue that spending and consuming truly does make them happy. It makes them feel good to buy things, to have new clothes, to drive a fancy car. This may be true for a short period of time. If these things truly make people happy, then why do they eventually

or repeatedly fulfilled  
making the people who  
can afford it perpetually happy. Brown 6

tire of their new things and want something more? Why is there never a point where they have enough? This constant desire is never really fulfilled. Someone will always have something you do not have. A person is not truly happy with what they have if they are always wanting something else. Research has shown, as mentioned above, that materialism does not have a positive correlation with satisfaction with life.

The endless pursuit of satisfaction through material needs has had various negative impacts. Most people are blind to the things that can bring true fulfillment. Life is passing us by as we race toward a goal that will never be realized. The most obvious result of this insane consumption is that people are working more than ever and have no free time to enjoy the simple things in life. People are moving so fast that they miss the life that is unfolding slowly around them. Ask the average person the last time they noticed the smell in the air after the rain, or to describe the feeling of the sun warming their hair or what new thing their child learned today. Ask the average person if they realized the resources that were used and the negative impacts on the environment that occurred to provide them with that cup of coffee they are drinking. Ask the average person to describe to you who they are without relating it to their job or possessions. I contend that most people would be unable to respond to most of these questions.

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There are those who argue that we do not, in fact, work more than we ever have and that we have just as much, if not more, free time than we have ever had. Among them is Robert Putnam of Harvard University. He discusses in his 1995 lecture the reasons for the loss of social capital, or citizen engagement in community activities. Included in the many causes that he dismisses is lack of free time. He states that long hours of work are not associated with civic disengagement, that people who work a lot do not feel rushed or deprived of free time. Juliet Schor refutes this argument. She contends that Putnam's methods and statistics are flawed; that surveys of work and leisure time do not differentiate between voluntary leisure and involuntary leisure caused by involuntary unemployment or underemployment. More accurate tests reveal that people are working more and enjoying less free time. Putnam says that people just think they

work more. Schor says that people who do work a lot (55+ hours per week) tend to think they are working more than they really are. So, even if it is true that people think they work more, this may exaggerate the circumstances, but does not negate the basic hypothesis. Schor concludes that increasing numbers of Americans experience their lives as hectic and pressured.

I think the point to be made is not whether people are actually working more, but rather that many people, as studies such as Schor's show, feel like they work too much. The benefits of this work are not worth the costs. The benefit, the increased ability to consume, is ultimately unfulfilling. John Degraaf, in his article *Free Time Day*, argues that free time is more beneficial way of reaping the benefits of productivity than receiving increased pay. Working too much has negative effects on health, relationships, community, employment opportunities, spirituality, environment, citizenship and choice. Decreasing work time could have a positive effect in all of these areas.

Despite all the reasons to support the voluntary simplicity movement, there is opposition, especially from the marketing and industrial sectors. Economists would argue that decreased consumption would have a large negative impact on our economy. Tom Vanderbilt asks in his article for *The Nation*, "into what precarious straits would the U.S. economy be plunged if the advice of one simple-life book were followed en masse?" He also argues that it takes incredible resolve to get out of the cycle of spending and that simple living is having diminished expectations. He also states that some of the simple living advocates are backed by the very capitalist corporations they admonish. (For example, one author is published by a subsidiary of Walt Disney). Richens and Dawson note that high consumption is beneficial to businesses, productivity and leads to higher living standards. Jock Finlayson argues that decreasing the work week will cause workers to be dissatisfied, especially with the decreased personal income that would inevitably ensue. He says labor costs would increase because there would be a need for more workers. It is less expensive to increase hours of current employees than to hire new ones. Skill shortages would increase as well.

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Failure of the economy is a legitimate concern associated with simple living. This is, in part, due to the fact that we as a country have been convinced that our economy must grow indefinitely. I do not believe that this is necessary. Our individual lives are a paradigm for the life of the country as a whole. Why must we always have more? If individuals can sustain themselves at a reasonable, low impact level of existence, why not the country? After all, the country is made up of individuals. Due to reduced consumption, the economy may cease to grow, but I do not believe it would collapse. An article entitled "*Trend in Consumer Behavior Called 'Voluntary Simplicity' Poses Challenges for Marketer,*" does a good job of supporting this argument. It notes that simple livers are still consumers, they are only more thoughtful about their purchases. It goes on to say that "faced with political uncertainty, security issues, privacy concerns, the explosion of technology and many other complex issues, individuals are focusing on their core values, and their consumption patterns reflect that identity" (Ascribe 2001). Marketers can target this population by realizing that simple livers will require higher quality products because when they do make a purchase it will most likely be well thought out and required to last for a long time. It will also need to be environmentally friendly and conducive to fair trade (no sweat-shop type products). Industry may have to take some cuts in profits, but they will still be able to make profits. They have always found ways to make a profit. Industry has been reaping most the benefits of the growing economy for decades, how much more do we think they need?

The other arguments against reduced consumption/working less can be refuted as well. If people learn that income is not the only means to satisfaction, then people will not be dissatisfied with earning less money. Having time to pursue ones desires in a non-materialistic manner will ultimately bring greater satisfaction than earning money to acquire things with which people are never truly satisfied. Simple living is not a diminishing of expectations, but a shifting of expectations. As material things become less important, non tangible things like sense of community, spirituality, a sense of well-being, become more important. In a way it is an increase in expectations, because we would no longer be content to be pacified or distracted by material



things. We would require much deeper, more meaningful things from life. Lastly, the fact that a couple of simplicity advocates have been supported by the institutions they condemn, does not mean that the entire ideology of the movement is flawed.

Reducing the work week can also have positive effects for employers and provide a more equitable distribution of resources. Employees who work less have higher productivity. They are less tired and resentful of having to be at work and thus able to work harder. There will be fewer disability claims as a result of reduced stress, as well as reduced absenteeism. Health care benefits will decrease because job related illnesses would decrease. If people work less, there will be more jobs available, or increased job sharing.

*↳ But more people working means more health care costs*

Simple living does not have to be dramatic and does not take an incredible amount of resolve to accomplish. As previously mentioned, all that is really required is a shift in perception and increased awareness. If we learn to see ourselves more for who we really are rather than who we are in the eyes of a consumer society, we will realize that we have worth that has nothing to do with our possessions. If we have awareness of how we are living our lives, we begin to ask ourselves questions like, "Why am I doing this?", "Does this really make me happy?" and if so, "How long will this happiness last?". We may also ask, "What impacts do my actions have?", "What other ways could I be spending my time?", "What parts of life am I missing out on?" and "Do the benefits of this outweigh the costs?". Once we shift our perception and increase our awareness, positive actions will surely follow.

The benefits of simplicity are many. Decreased consumption means our resources are not used up as quickly and our environment is not polluted at such a high rate. Decreasing our use of technology has the same benefits and it can put us more in touch with each other and with life. For example, instead of watching TV we visit a neighbor. Instead of surfing the web we join a volunteer organization. Instead of driving the car to the store we enjoy walking and seeing the beauty of a new day. Working less gives us time to pursue our life's endeavors. We may take a photography class, get more involved in local politics, explore our spirituality, help our children to

learn and grow. We would have more time to just relax. Our levels of stress induced anxiety and illness would decrease. I could go on and on with this list. In a nutshell, simplicity helps us get back to what life is really all about, and I can assure you it is not working and spending money.

In conclusion I would like to add a few things noted by Jerome Segal as I think he sums it all up quite eloquently. "Simply living is not some 1990's fad," he says, "Nor is it the product of foreign ideologies" (Segal 1996). "The basic objective is to put the economic realm in its proper (i.e. limited) place and to make room for the rest of life," he declares. There is so much more I could have said and wanted to say about voluntary simplicity, but I have already gone beyond the limits of time and effort I had planned to spend on this project. I will add one more thing; that is my own personal experience. I have decided to embark on the journey of simple living myself. Although I have only just begun, I feel good about the changes I have made already. Although I can afford a car, I choose not to own one. I walk to the grocery store once a week. I now only work one job and have requested fewer hours. I am learning to speak up when the demands of work are too much. I am learning to analyze and prioritize requests for my time. I have reduced my spending and when I do spend I opt for products that will last, that have no planned - *easy/hard to find?* obsolescence. I avoid using air conditioning and heat in my house whenever possible. I hang my clothes to dry, enjoy cooking at home, I recycle everything I can and keep my lights turned off when I am not using them. I have tried to get involved with an environmental group at school and with a community contra dance twice a month. I vote. I make it a point to spend time with friends. These are only a few small things that have come about from my own increased awareness of the way I live my life. I only need to ask myself a few simple questions every day and the rest falls into place. I may not do it perfectly or dramatically, but I feel good about what I am doing and I am enjoying my life. My friend Sue would be proud.

*This is a wonderfully  
done paper. Well written, deep,  
insightful, well researched -*

*A superb job.*

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