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Are We Simple Creatures?

Jerome Segal

In the philosophical traditions of both the East and the West, one encounters the idea that human beings may attain the good life by satisfying a small number of basic needs. Often this belief find expression in myths of a golden age that we have lost by allowing our needs and desires to multiply. The Roman author Seneca invokes a simpler past in his articulation of Stoic philosophy:

> Was it not enough for man to provide himself a roof of any chance covering and to contrive for himself some natural retreat without the help of art and without trouble? Believe me, that was a happy age, before the days of architects, before the days of builders!

And further:

> For the limit everywhere corresponded to the need; it is we that have made all other things valuable, we that have made them admired, we that have caused them to be sought for by extensive and manifold devices.... That moderation which nature prescribes, which limits our desires by resources restricted to our needs, has abandoned the field.

The biblical story of the Garden of Eden is, on one level, a story about the incompatibility of the simple life and overreaching human desires. God tells Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but beguiled by the serpent, first Eve and then Adam eat the forbidden fruit. Adopting the perspective of modern critics of consumer culture, we might say that Adam and Eve were seduced by the serpent who is history's first huckster, suckering them into overconsumption. When they had limited desires, they were content. Then the serpent intervened and flashed the shiny fruit; he induced new desires, and with that they got into trouble.

But the story is really more interesting than that. If we read carefully, we see that after the serpent tells Eve that by eating the fruit "your eyes will be opened," and after he assures her that this is really a safe product to consume, Eve comes to her own conclusion: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate."

Why should Eve have been moved by the tree's being a source of wisdom, and why should she have perceived it thus? The answer is clear. Even in the Garden of Eden, from the very first, as part of the inherent motivation of humanity, Eve, if not Adam, was a seeker of wisdom. Moreover, it would seem that Eve desired wisdom for its own sake, and not for any instrumental purpose, since, in the Garden, everything was taken care of. Thus we find, within our central myth of our original condition, the image of an interesting and complex human being.

For today's advocates of a less consumption-oriented way of life, it is a question of some importance whether we are, in fact, simple creatures or complex ones. Many people assume that the case for simple living depends on the notion that our *needs* are simple. Are they right? When our desires proliferate, is the process a distortion or an expression of human nature?

Consumption and Self-Esteem

One account of why we consume—an account indebted to Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption—postulates a set of core psychological needs to explain the emergence of our desires for specific commodities. This account calls attention to three features of our psychological and cultural experience.

First, part of what it is to be a person is to be the object of one's own perception; over time, we develop a stake in seeing ourselves in particular ways. Second, how we see ourselves is to a considerable extent typically affected by how others see us. And third, to varying degrees in human cultures, how others see us is partially determined by aspects of our involvement in the economy—how we consume, what we earn, what we do for a living.

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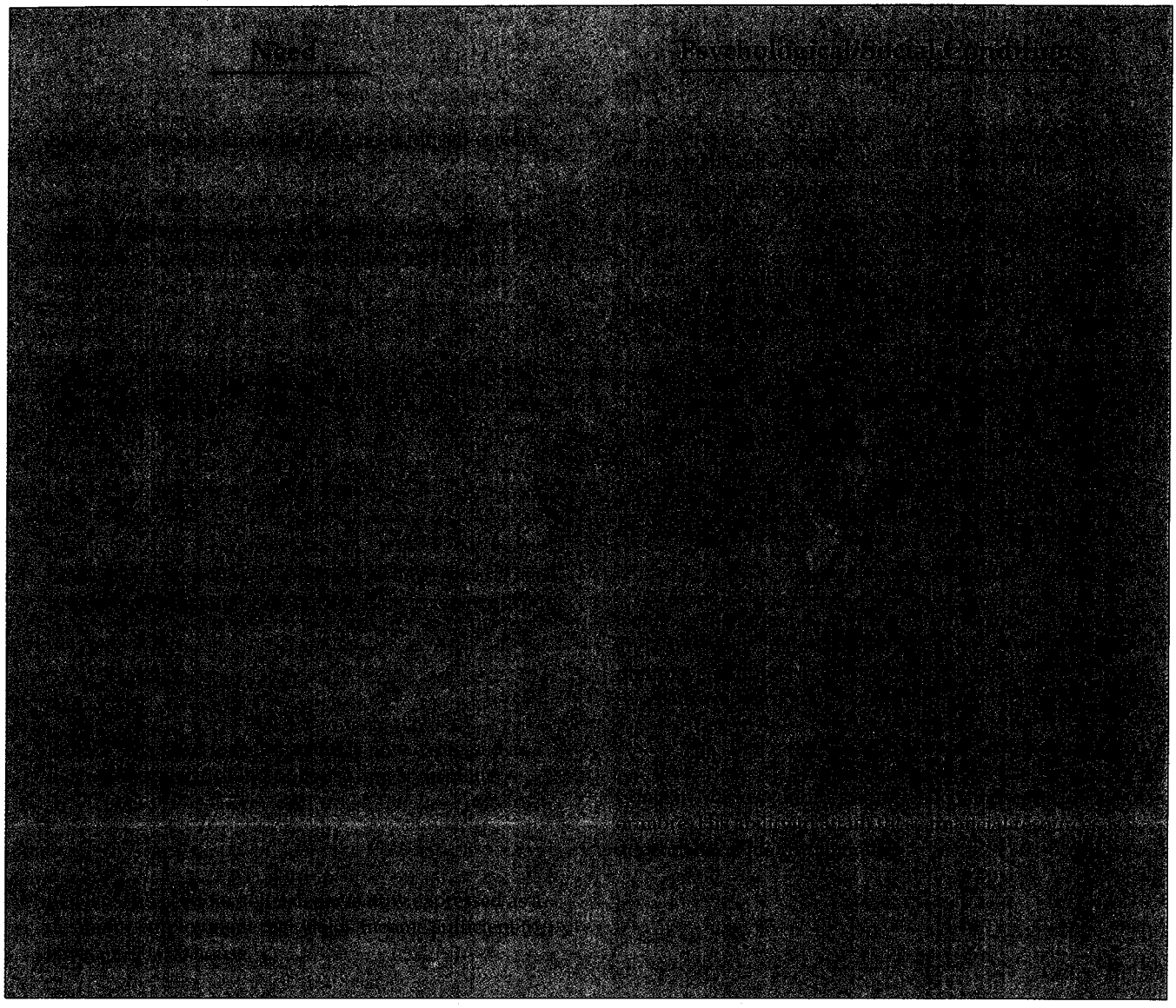
Clearly, the three features are closely related. The satisfaction of the need to see oneself in a certain way is dependent on how one is seen by others, and the considerations that determine how others will see any individual are to some extent cultural givens. If one

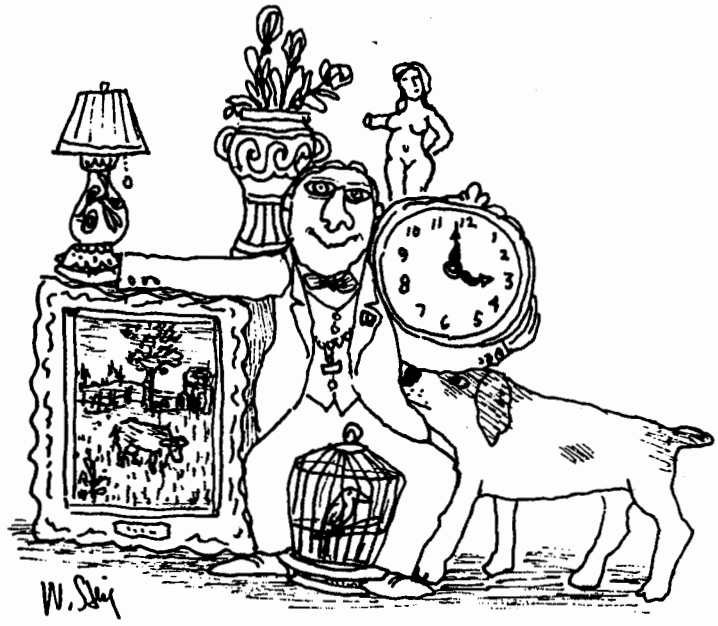


internalizes these cultural norms, then even the actual perceptions of others may drop out of the equation, as one perceives oneself through the eyes of the culture or subculture. And finally, to the extent that these norms include particular consumption choices, the underlying need for self-esteem will be transformed into desires for specific marketplace commodities.

The diagram above illustrates this process for a modern-day Adam, portraying the context in which the need for self-esteem will be transformed. If we retrace the stages of the process from Adam's perspective, we can say that his need for self-esteem first emerges as a need to have others see him as valuable. Once these "others" become identified with a select reference group, the need for self-esteem emerges as a need to satisfy the consumption norms of that group, and then as a desire for a specific kind of house and style of life. In our example, the process reaches a (temporary) culmination when Adam's need for self-esteem is expressed as a desire for employment that yields income sufficient to have a $200,000 house.

My description of this process does not at first mention desires; the starting point is the need or drive for self-esteem. The individual typically is not conscious of such a need, and its existence is not dependent on his awareness of it. To say that Adam has a need for self-esteem is to say that, on a very basic level, something will go seriously wrong in his life if he fails to develop it. How this fundamental, and perhaps universal, need gets transformed into a desire for certain kinds of jobs, or for a multiplicity of consumer goods, is a matter of social and economic context.

As the underlying need becomes more concretely related to actions that Adam can actually take to satisfy it (or that he believes will satisfy it), it emerges more fully as a conscious desire. And this desire may



Possessions are part of the self.

now be expressed in plans and intentions. For instance, in order to obtain a particular kind of job, Adam may seek to go to law school, and in order to get into law school he may seek to do well as an undergraduate. This desire, in turn, may proliferate into a thousand more concrete desires—to do well on a test, to get to class on time, to finish his assignments, and so on.

This account of transformations in the human need for self-esteem leaves many questions unanswered. Still, it is useful in allowing us to distinguish among the levels at which different anticonsumerist orientations throughout history have tried to intervene in the process by which desires for money and commodities shape human life. Thus, the Stoic tradition, with its emphasis on individual self-sufficiency, might be understood as an effort to prevent the general need for self-esteem from becoming a need for the approval of others (level 2). Buddhism might be thought of as intervening on an even more basic level, whereby the sense of self is so utterly changed that the need for self-esteem is itself extinguished (level 1). And the creation of utopian communities, including nineteenth-century experiments such as Brook Farm, might be thought of as an attempt to substitute a different subculture as the reference group (level 3).

As these examples suggest, the recognition that deep needs may be transformed into desires for goods and services has a long history. Nonetheless, there are reasons to doubt that the need for self-esteem is *the* basis for consumer culture. When people adopt the consumption patterns of their reference group, they are not always motivated by status considerations. As Judith Lichtenberg has noted, our peers may simply be sources of information about new products, and these products may satisfy legitimate needs that are entirely distinct from our need for self-esteem. In thinking about whether we are complex or simple creatures, we must now ask what some of these other needs might be.

The Marketeers

I will begin with a book that was written explicitly for what the authors call "marketeers"—that is, people who specialize in getting consumers to want to buy specific products. In *Why They Buy: American Consumers Inside and Out*, the authors take a remarkably fine-grained approach to human psychology, identifying some sixty specific needs. These include: to be visible to others, to accomplish difficult tasks, to give care, to play, to establish one's sexual identity, to exercise one's talents, to win over adversaries, to see living things thrive, to learn new skills, to be amazed. Having presented this list, the authors then identify the kinds of goods that "serve each kind of need."

Their advice is that if you want to succeed in marketing, it is essential to know your consumer, to understand what his needs are, and to know what needs your product serves. The marketeers are told that it is important for them to "instill purchase incentives in the minds of potential buyers" by "teaching consumers about what they will get" from a product in terms of need fulfillment.

Although one might want to challenge either the legitimacy or the very existence of some of the needs on the list, for the most part they do seem real, important, and valid. Moreover, even this enumeration, which is the most extensive I have seen, is clearly not exhaustive. For example, the authors do not include a need for insight into oneself, or the need for meaningful work, nor do they include a need for beauty or adventure, or a need for a comprehensive vision of life.

Considering a list of this kind, whatever its source, is very instructive. For one thing, it may prompt us to realize that, independent of market manipulations, we do have abundant and diverse needs and desires, and that certain of these needs can be met by goods and services that the marketeers promote.

In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that marketeers are not guilty of manipulation. Advertisers typically encourage us to satisfy some needs at the expense of others. They exaggerate their product's capacity to meet a legitimate need, and frequently make use of nonrational processes to induce us to associate their product with a desired outcome. But for our purposes here, the critical point is that the marketeers are surely right to assert the existence of a varied, substantial set of legitimate human needs. Given this fact, how should advocates of simpler living respond?

Arguments for Simple Living

There are a number of persuasive responses, none of which rests on viewing human beings as simple creatures.

First, when it comes to our most fundamental needs—for love, meaning, friendship, self-expression, understanding—commodities may, in the marketeers' terms, be "of service," but they rarely supply the genuine article. Often enough, they merely divert us from the fact that the essential need is not being fulfilled, or else provide a spurious compensation for it. At best, commodities may offer a symbolic or false taste of the real thing.

To say this, though, is not to deny their importance. Finding genuine satisfaction for our needs is not easy, and most people are at best only partially successful in this search. In a world where much depends on chance, and in which not everyone develops the human capabilities to attain the genuine article, the second-best fulfillments that money provides may be of substantial

value. On the other hand, once we recognize the second-best nature of the comforts that the marketplace provides, we can insist that these should not be the objects of our ultimate aspirations.

Second, even when the purchase of goods and services can satisfy our needs, the fulfillment may come at an extremely high personal and social cost. Consumption requires income—which in turn, for most of us, requires labor. And labor is costly in two ways. For many people, labor beyond a certain point is unpleasant, painful, unhealthy, or boring. And even where it is not, labor takes time—time to prepare for, time to get to, time to perform, time to return from, and time to recover from. Yet the amount of time we have is relatively fixed. Time we devote to acquiring the means of consumption is time that we do not have for other aspects of life. This fact alone makes the case for simple living enormously compelling. If we have a choice between high-consumption and low-consumption ways of meeting our legitimate needs, it makes sense for us, individually and collectively, to pursue the latter course.

This leads to my final point. Once we recognize the variety of human needs, we can begin to imagine lives that partake of diverse forms of richness: material, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, and social. In other words, we can see that genuine wealth resides in an extraordinarily broad range of "assets," the possession of which determines whether our abundant needs will be fulfilled.

- *social relationships:* our friendships, loves, and families
- *psychological capabilities:* our ability to build relationships, to find meaning, to take aesthetic pleasure
- *cognitive capabilities:* our ability to read, to understand, to learn, to reason
- *creative capabilities:* our ability to make something beautiful, to contribute something different
- *political rights:* our ability to be a citizen of one country rather than another, to build our own lives according to our own lights
- *historical and cultural legacy:* the riches of insight and experience that have been preserved from previous human lives and that are embodied in the great achievements of human culture
- *natural and man-made physical environments:* the beauty of great cities, of the wilderness, of the view from one's back porch

Material wealth is not irrelevant, but its role in the good life is largely to facilitate our access to these other forms of wealth. As the great philosophers have long told us, excessive concern with consumption often thwarts our efforts to realize the multiple possibilities of our nature. Advocates of simple living best advance their cause when they remind us of those possibilities, not when they ask us to believe that human beings are simple creatures.

—Jerome M. Segal

Reconciliation for Realists

As the millennium draws to a close, there appears to be a global frenzy to balance moral ledgers. Talk of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation is everywhere. The Canadian government recently made a "solemn offer of reconciliation," backed up by a $250 million "healing fund," to that country's 1.3 million Aboriginal people; Australians lined up to put their names in a "sorry book" offering personal apologies for an earlier state policy that removed Aboriginal children from their families; and President Kim Dae Jung formally accepted Japan's written apology for harms caused during its 35-year occupation of South Korea. In what may be the most familiar example, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) held extensive public hearings about abuses committed during the apartheid era, issued a final report, and continues to rule on petitions for amnesty from former security officials and African National Congress members who have confessed to politically motivated crimes.

While such efforts may seem laudable, it remains unclear whether they constitute a just or adequate response to the historical injuries they seek to address. The problem resists solution, in part, because as a moral and political concept, *reconciliation* raises inherently difficult questions. For example: Is reconciliation